



Brandeis University

Crown Center
for Middle East Studies

Mailstop 010
Waltham, Massachusetts
02454-9110

781-736-5320
781-736-5324 Fax
www.brandeis.edu/crown

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and Professor of Politics*
Shai Feldman

Associate Director
Kristina Cherniahivsky

*Charles (Corky) Goodman Professor
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Middle East Brief

Israel and the Palestinians: Sliding toward a One-State Reality

Shai Feldman and Khalil Shikaki

In his meeting with *The New York Times* Editorial Board on November 22, 2016, President-elect Donald Trump expressed his hopes of seeing his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, lead an effort to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.¹ Yet rarely since Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem in June 1967 have conditions for resolving the conflict been worse than they are today. Moreover, in the absence of significant progress toward resolving the conflict, facts are being created “on the ground” that will make any future effort to negotiate and implement an agreement to resolve the conflict even more difficult, if not entirely impossible. With Israel continuing to control the entire area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, the slide toward a “one-state reality” will continue.

This Brief seeks to ascertain what has led to this state of affairs. It will also highlight the implications of this emerging “reality” for Israel and the Palestinians by assessing the different ways in which this “reality,” once consolidated, could trigger negative domestic, regional, and systemic outcomes that may be destructive to both Palestinian and Israeli interests.

“The Golden Era”

To understand the current stalemate, it is useful to reflect on a previous four-year period (1991–95) that constituted something of a “golden era” in Arab-

Prof. Shai Feldman is the
Judith and Sidney Swartz
Director of the Crown
Center.

Dr. Khalil Shikaki is a
Senior Fellow at the Crown
Center and is Director of
the Palestinian Center for
Policy and Survey Research
(PCPSR) in Ramallah.

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Israeli peacemaking. That relatively short period witnessed not less than four breakthroughs: the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference, the 1992–95 multilateral negotiations, the 1993 Oslo Accords, and the 1994 Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty. These breakthroughs were made possible by a unique set of positive developments in the global arena, in the Middle East region itself, and in the domestic politics of key players.

In the global arena, the Soviet Union had just collapsed and the Cold War had just ended, leaving the United States as the sole superpower and thereby creating a unipolar “American moment” globally, which allowed the U.S. to design and implement a “Pax Americana” in the Middle East. Moreover, at the beginning of this period, the U.S. was led by President George H. W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker, both of whom were motivated to forge a new global order and a new regional order, so that America could avoid a repeat of the Gulf War.

In the region, a U.S.-led coalition (that, importantly, included Syria as well as Egypt) had just defeated Iraq in the 1990–91 Gulf War, tilting the balance of power against the rejectionists (Iraq, Libya, and Yemen) and in favor of the region’s more pragmatic players (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the smaller members of the GCC). The Gulf War exposed both Jordan and the PLO to external pressures: Both were seen as siding with Saddam Hussein, thereby earning them the wrath of their financial backers in the Gulf. Jordan had also angered Washington for the same reason, enabling the Clinton administration to persuade King Hussein that the U.S. Congress would not renew financial assistance to Jordan without the latter first taking a dramatic, positive step in Arab-Israeli peacemaking. Finally, the U.S. also enjoyed considerable leverage with respect to Israel at that time because the collapse of the Soviet Union had brought a million new immigrants to Israel, whose absorption required \$10 billion in U.S. loan guarantees.

The domestic politics of some of the key players also helped to make this short period a “golden era” of Arab-Israeli peacemaking. In Israel, the 1992 elections brought the Labor Party, led by Yitzhak Rabin, back into power. Rabin was committed to reaching a peace breakthrough, and as a hero of the 1967 war, he enjoyed the requisite credibility: He was broadly trusted to make the right call as to what concessions Israel could make for peace without jeopardizing Israeli security. Jordan’s King Hussein and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat enjoyed similar standing in their respective polities, and both were motivated by the danger of financial ruin. In Arafat’s case, that was on top of the threat he was facing from rival Palestinian leaders (like Faisal Husseini), who continued to reside in the West Bank, Gaza, or East Jerusalem, and whose standing was secured by their role in the 1987–90 First Palestinian Intifada.

Given that the stars were aligned in the global, regional, and domestic political realms, it is not entirely surprising that the early 1990s produced positive breakthroughs in Arab-Israeli peacemaking. Unfortunately, the opposite has been the case for most of the past decade and a half. Moreover, despite the personal desires expressed by President-elect Trump to *The New York Times* on November 22, there is no reason to believe that the environment on any of these levels will become more conducive to peacemaking breakthroughs any time soon. Under such circumstances, the slide toward a “one-state reality” is bound to continue.

The Global Environment

Although what could be described as “the American moment” lasted for more than two decades, U.S. efforts to utilize its global primacy to advance Arab-Israeli peace have been sporadic for the past fifteen years. Indeed, it was only at the end of its second term in office that the George W. Bush administration made its first serious attempt to help resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, launching the Annapolis Process in November 2007.² Yet even then, U.S. involvement in the talks was minimal, as it refrained from offering proposals to help the parties bridge the gap between their positions. Thus, between March and September 2008, when President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert arguably made the most substantial progress in the history of Palestinian-Israeli permanent status negotiations, the Bush administration was content with merely taking note of the progress made rather than capitalizing on it by offering the parties the “ultimate deal”—a grand bargain based on that progress.

The U.S. continued and, indeed, enhanced its involvement during President Obama’s two terms, as evidenced by the 2009 efforts led by Former Senator George Mitchell and the 2013–14 attempts orchestrated by Secretary of State John Kerry. In the first of these two efforts, the president was personally involved at critical junctures, as were members of his White House senior staff. Yet even Obama refrained from building on the progress made in the context of the Annapolis Process or using that progress as a point of departure for his own efforts. He also refrained from taking the step that was key to U.S. successes in Arab-Israeli peacemaking in previous eras—as implemented by Henry Kissinger in 1974–75, by President Jimmy Carter in 1978–79, and by President Bush and Secretary of State Baker in 1991—namely, the willingness to utilize U.S. leverage to press the parties to accept important compromises. Indeed, in the realm of Arab-Israeli peacemaking, President Obama leveraged his personal involvement in the process only once, when he pressured Israel to implement a limited settlement construction freeze—and that intervention was directed at improving the environment for negotiations, not at extracting Israeli or Palestinian concessions on any of the core permanent status issues. Thereafter, the U.S. leveraged neither its security assistance to Israel nor its financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority to induce Netanyahu and Abbas to negotiate seriously during the ten months of the partial Israeli settlement construction freeze; nor did it mobilize Europeans to exploit their financial assistance to the PA, or their trade and other cooperative relations with Israel, for a similar purpose.

Unfortunately, the global environment that Donald Trump will be inheriting on January 20, 2017, when he is sworn in as the 46th president of the United States will be even less hospitable to effective American intervention. First, while the U.S. remains much more powerful, economically as well as militarily, than any possible competitor, unipolarity and “the American moment” are over. Russia is back and is challenging the U.S. in a number of arenas: Ukraine, the Baltic region, and Syria. Indeed, President Trump is likely to discover quickly that turning President Vladimir Putin from a foe to a partner without accepting some of his demands—especially regarding Ukraine and the Baltic states—will be far more difficult than he seems to imagine now.

Second, in the coming years, other issues and challenges are likely to be accorded far greater priority in America’s foreign and defense policies agenda. One important such challenge will be managing the aforementioned relations with Russia—a critically important task, given the nuclear arsenals that the two countries possess and the nontrivial likelihood of misperceptions and miscalculations leading to inadvertent escalation. Managing these relations will also involve huge alliance management complications, as any effort to accommodate Russia will likely result in heightened anxiety among America’s NATO allies, as well as among its friends and allies in the Middle East.

Another important challenge will be deterring North Korea from engaging in adventurism that might result in nuclear catastrophe. This, in turn, will involve another complicated alliance management problem, as both South Korea and Japan seem equally terrified by the prospect of reckless North Korean behavior and the possibility that the U.S. might overreact to such behavior. And, they will worry that the new administration might not signal the requisite resolve in the face of China’s attempts to rewrite the “rules of the game,” especially in the South China Sea.

Finally, managing post-ISIS challenges to make sure that the organization does not simply reconfigure and reinvent itself under a different framework and that it does not metastasize in North Africa, Europe, and even the U.S. will necessarily occupy much of the next president’s time and energy, as will dealing with other security challenges and humanitarian catastrophes in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya.

In this complicated and very demanding global environment, it is highly unlikely that the next president will devote significant resources to resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict—a conflict that does not pose direct or acute threats to critical U.S. security and other national interests. For precisely the same reasons, it is

equally unlikely that the next administration will take deliberate steps to inflame the conflict—for example, by moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Instead, by default, the Trump administration will likely adopt a “benign neglect” approach, thereby facilitating the continuation of the current slide to a “one-state reality.”

The Regional Context

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict cannot be resolved without the active support of key Arab states. Jordan and Saudi Arabia have a direct interest in issues revolving around Jerusalem, and Morocco holds the Jerusalem file for the Arab League. Similarly, the Palestinian refugees issue cannot be addressed without the help of key Arab states, as without them, no scheme involving the permanent resettlement of a considerable number of refugees in Arab states would work.

Yet, the condition of the Arab world currently bears no resemblance to the circumstances that prevailed when the Arab League convened in Beirut in March 2002 to adopt what came to be known as the Arab Peace Initiative.³ While Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan remain committed to the API and insist that Israel must first formally accept it as a basis for future negotiations, they are completely consumed by their domestic challenges: a faltering economy, along with unrelenting terrorism in the Sinai, in the case of Egypt; more than 700,000 Syrian refugees in the case of Jordan. Four countries—Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen—have been beset by civil wars and their attendant devastation since 2002. Under such circumstances, even the small number of Arab states that remain intact have more urgent matters to deal with than helping to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Moreover, the aforementioned Arab civil wars have caused key regional players like Saudi Arabia and Egypt to view the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through a new lens. While remaining committed to the Palestinian cause, these players are affected by the very heavy toll that the recent regional horrors have already taken. The five-year Syrian civil war alone has already resulted in more dead and wounded and produced far more refugees and internally displaced persons than the Arab-Israeli conflict did through its entire history.

To a far greater degree than ever before, the national security interests of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia currently coincide with those of Israel, as do the threat assessments made by their rulers. As a result, there is considerable reluctance in Cairo, Amman, and Riyadh to press Israel to make the concessions required by the API.

The Israeli Domestic Scene

In the Israeli domestic arena, the most important driver of the slide toward a “one-state reality” is the increasing right-wing tendencies among the electorate, triggered by five years of the Second Intifada, culminating in Hamas’s 2006 electoral victory. During the past eight years, Benjamin Netanyahu won three parliamentary elections. Yet, Israel’s prime minister, having now served in that capacity longer than any of his predecessors, cannot take any step that would slow, if not reverse, the movement toward one state without risking the loss of his current coalition. And if Netanyahu were to change the composition of his coalition by replacing the parties to the right of Likud with center and center-left parties, then he would lose the ability to lead the right wing in the next national election.

Moreover, the demise of Labor in the years following the 2001 elections has meant that increasingly, Netanyahu does not face any serious challenge from the left and the center-left. Instead, the most significant political threats—real or imagined—that he faces are from within the right, questioning his dedication to its core values and objectives and hence his legitimacy as an authentic leader of the right wing. Thus, Israel’s prime minister is increasingly challenged by the likes of Jewish Home Party Leader and Minister of Education Naftali Bennett, who calls for abandoning any attempt to resolve the conflict and for annexing some 60 percent of the West Bank.

The dominant Israeli narrative about the consequences of Israeli withdrawals since 2000 presents another barrier to compromise. Israelis’ understanding is that their withdrawals from Lebanon in May 2000 and from Gaza in the summer of 2005 resulted in the strengthening of Hezbollah and Hamas, and that that in turn led respectively to the 2006 Second Lebanon War and to the three military confrontations with Hamas in 2009, 2012, and 2014. This belief has made it easier to frighten Israelis about the likely consequences of a withdrawal from the West Bank—the area adjacent to Israel’s center core, where the country’s main population centers are located and where some 80 percent of its GDP is produced.

The carnage in Syria, and to a lesser extent in Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the eruption of the so-called Arab Spring in late 2010, has had a similar effect on Israeli public opinion. As images of carnage and upheaval appeared in Israeli media on an almost daily basis, Israelis became even more persuaded that the Middle East is an unforgiving neighborhood, where taking risks could prove a major folly—and that instead they should “hunker down” and await better days.

Furthermore, as is clearly evident from recent polls among Israeli Jews, the current situation, despite its one-state dynamics, is a relatively comfortable one for Israelis. Indeed, public demand for progress with the Palestinians is very weak; most Israelis know little about Palestinians' lives under occupation, and given the prevailing peace and quiet they currently enjoy, few feel the urge to demand any policy change. Unlike what was the case in the middle of the Second Intifada (2002–4), for example, only a minority of Israelis today demand either “separation” from the Palestinians or a halt to settlement activities. Moreover, as survey research indicates, the overwhelming majority of Israelis do not trust the Palestinians; rather, most fear the Palestinians and their long-term aspirations and believe that most Palestinians do not support a two-state solution. Indeed, most Israelis also agree with Netanyahu that Abbas is not a partner for peace.

As a result of these developments, while a slight majority of Israelis remain supportive of a two-state solution to the conflict and would therefore not constitute an impediment to a leadership determined to implement this solution, the center and center-left are too weak to push the government to accept such a solution. Hence, even if Netanyahu wanted to avoid what he calls a “bi-national state,” which he regards as a disaster, his room for maneuvering is extremely narrow, preventing him from taking any significant step that might slow, let alone end, the slide toward a “one-state reality.”

The Palestinian Domestic Scene

On the Palestinian side, Islamist-nationalist division is deepening, and fragmentation within the mainstream Fatah movement has now been affirmed by Fatah's Seventh Convention, as Muhammad Dahlan and other opponents of President Abbas have been expelled or marginalized. This crisis of leadership within Fatah is contributing to political paralysis, as Abbas seems to be increasingly consumed by threats to his rule—real or imagined—rather than by the challenges presented by continued Israeli occupation.

Moreover, without a Fatah-Hamas reconciliation, Abbas will probably find it difficult if not impossible to hold new elections, to regain legitimacy, or to transfer leadership to another Fatah leader. Indeed, the crisis of succession within Fatah and the PA is already weakening the Palestinians' capacity to present a coherent position in the conflict with Israel. This situation is exacerbated by the fragility and weakness of the Palestinian political system, which lacks electoral legitimacy, parliamentary accountability, and an independent judiciary.

The most distressing aspect of the status quo for Palestinians is that it is a dynamic state of affairs, bringing with it, on a daily basis, solid facts on the ground—primarily settlement construction—that make Israel's occupation more difficult to reverse. Furthermore, occupation policies impose significant pain and suffering on the Palestinian public and constrain any sustainable development or economic growth. Indeed, most Palestinians believe that a system of apartheid is gradually being built around them, and the international community is not doing anything meaningful to prevent it.

Nonetheless, most Palestinians remain committed to a two-state solution;⁵ hence, Palestinian public opinion is not likely to be an impediment to a peace agreement that Abbas might reach with an Israeli prime minister. But, as is the case with the Israelis, the Palestinian public is not a force for peace: The overwhelming majority do not trust the Israelis and fear Israel's long-term aspirations. And, most Palestinians believe that the majority of Israelis are opposed to a two-state solution.⁶

The Slide's Consequences

The creation of the Palestinian Authority in 1994 was stipulated by the September 1993 Oslo Accords, which in turn were predicated on an effort to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict based on the two-state paradigm. The continued and possibly accelerated slide toward a “one-state reality,” on the other hand, will result in a total loss of the PA's legitimacy. Instead of being seen as the harbinger of a future independent Palestinian state, the PA will be viewed increasingly by Palestinians as the protector of Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Abbas' efforts to compensate for this loss of legitimacy by seeking greater international recognition will most likely be blocked by the United States. Indeed, the PA might pay a financial price for pursuing these efforts, as the Trump administration might heed Congress's call for financial and political sanctions against Abbas.

The resulting destabilization, if not collapse, of the PA would also mean the end of security cooperation with Israel. This may not happen overnight, but once the process begins, it may accelerate rapidly. This is because once the PA's security services begin to fail to stop violence directed at Israel, the latter's preventive as well as financial and other retaliatory measures, along with punitive measures that the U.S. Congress will likely adopt against the PA, would combine to jeopardize the latter's ability to pay the salaries of members of its security services.

Thus, Abbas will be deprived of the tools that prevented the escalation of the burgeoning Palestinian-Israeli violence experienced in 2015–16.

The loss of legitimacy of the PA and of President Abbas will also further weaken Abbas' party, Fatah, thus tilting the internal balance among Palestinians away from the secular nationalists and toward the Islamists led by Hamas. Under such circumstances, the nationalists' ability to maintain public support will further diminish, particularly given the rising influence of Islamists in the Arab world.

On Israel's side, the ability to maintain the state's character as both Jewish and democratic is increasingly threatened by its settlement construction and other occupation policies. Nevertheless, Israelis—perhaps on account of the perception that the pullout from the Gaza Strip, with its 1.8 million Palestinians, has diminished the demographic problem—feel no urgency to address this apparent conflict.

Moreover, the Israeli right wing, now expecting that the incoming Trump administration will tolerate Israel's settlement construction policy, already feels emboldened to pressure the Netanyahu government to pursue a more pro-settlements policy. In time, there will likely be demands to impose Israeli law on selected settlements or settlement blocs, to allow greater confiscation of private Palestinian land and more demolishing of Palestinian homes, and to pursue an even more anti-Arab policy in East Jerusalem.

In the broader international arena, the collapse of the two-state paradigm will be seen as implying the permanence of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem—the Trump administration's first year will also mark the fiftieth anniversary of the occupation—and as depriving the Palestinians residing in these territories of political participatory rights. As a result, the propensity to view Israel through the prism of an apartheid state will gain increasing traction, particularly in Europe—Israel's largest trading partner. With the American public being generally more sympathetic to Israel and with an equally if not even more supportive Trump administration, America will likely lag behind Europe in adopting the apartheid narrative. But, anti-Israel trajectories on university campuses in the U.S. may accelerate, and the sentiments of American churchgoers may also turn negative, even in the Evangelical community.

No less importantly, these trajectories may also result in Israel finding itself in conflict with most members of the American Jewish community. If Israel's right-wing government moves even further to the right and encourages American neglect of the conflict, many American Jews

will find themselves increasingly at odds with the Trump administration over its illiberal domestic policies and the possible rise in domestic sentiment against minorities, including anti-Semitism.

Equally ominously, the collapse of the two-state paradigm would also cast increasing doubts about the relevance of the November 1947 UN Resolution 181, otherwise known as “the partition resolution.” This would further complicate Israel's standing in the world because its founding and its international legitimacy are based on that resolution.

Lacking a Nelson Mandela and an F. W. de Klerk, who together brought a peaceful end to South Africa's apartheid regime—and given the aforementioned dysfunctional international, regional, and domestic political environments—the odds that Israelis and Palestinians will negotiate, let alone transition peacefully to, a new paradigm are extremely low. Indeed, no matter how repugnant the “one-state reality” becomes, it is not likely to be transformed, at least in the conceivable future, into a negotiated one-state solution: Most Palestinians oppose such a solution, and most Israeli Jews view it as an existential threat.⁷

More likely, therefore, the costs of the slide toward a “one-state reality” will resemble those associated with the Arab Spring efforts to replace the region's authoritarian regimes. Israel will likely take any measures necessary to resist its possible collapse, while Palestinians will fight by all possible means to prevent the emergence of a “one state” dominated by Israel and will wage war to ensure the Arab and Islamic character of such a state, if one does emerge. Given the power disparities between the two sides, the Palestinians will likely bear the brunt of the costs associated with such a war.

The resulting Palestinian-Israeli destabilization will probably also have considerable negative consequences for at least the two Arab countries that have made peace with Israel: Egypt and Jordan. These two countries are the most vulnerable to developments in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and view Palestinian statehood as a means of protecting their most vital national interests. They also happen to play key roles in securing American national interests in the Middle East and in implementing U.S. defense planning for the region. Indeed, escalating Palestinian-Israeli violence can be expected to similarly negatively affect, even if to a somewhat lesser extent, other Arab states that have inched closer to Israel in recent years, primarily Saudi Arabia.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis provided in this Brief points to the high odds that the two-state paradigm that for the past decades as the basis of almost all discussions about resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is about to lose its relevance. This will not have resulted from any party's deliberate decision, but rather from the present trajectories in the conflict's global and regional environments as well as in Israeli and Palestinian domestic conditions. These trajectories will likely lead to the creation of a "one-state reality"—the de facto transformation of the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River into one political unit.

The different consequences of the slide toward a "one-state reality" constituted the second focus of the analysis presented here. Indeed, the costs associated with this slide were shown to be considerable for Israelis as well as for Palestinians.

Yet the pace at which the slide toward a "one-state reality" will occur is difficult to determine, as is the pace at which the costs associated with this slide will be incurred. Clearly, should the incoming Trump administration reject a policy of neglect toward the conflict and instead embrace a policy of sustained engagement—let alone if it decided to launch a major and dramatic Arab-Israeli peacemaking effort—the expected slide might be slowed or even halted.⁸ By contrast, the slide could quickly accelerate if the incoming U.S. administration fully embraces Israeli right wing policies, as David Friedman, President-elect Trump's choice for ambassador to Israel, has suggested.⁹

The pace of the expected slide could also be affected by changes in the Palestinian and Israeli domestic situations, as well as by developments in the region as a whole. For example, the slide might be slowed if a further escalation in the geopolitical competition between some Arab states and Iran led the former to propose an amended Arab Peace Initiative that Israel might accept—and the Palestinians might not reject—as the basis for detailed negotiations. It is more difficult to anticipate how the expected slide would be affected, however, if the aging president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, were to suddenly leave the scene.

Thus, shifts in the global, regional, and domestic scenes may well affect the pace of the expected slide toward a "one-state reality." Yet, given the trajectories analyzed in this Brief, the direction of the resulting slide is currently unmistakable.

Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/22/us/politics/donald-trump-visit.html> and/or http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/23/us/politics/trump-new-york-times-interview-transcript.html?_r=0.
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- 8 Dennis Ross, "How Trump Could Surprise the World on Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking," *The Washington Post*, November 30, 2016, and Martin S. Indyk, "President Trump's Options for Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking," *Brookings Big Ideas for America*, December 1, 2016.
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Brandeis University Crown Center
for Middle East Studies

Mailstop 010
Waltham, Massachusetts
02454-9110

781-736-5320
781-736-5324 Fax
www.brandeis.edu/crown

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