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Epilogue

If Jerusalem is off the table, then America is off the table as well.

—Nabil Abu Rudeineh, spokesman for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, January 2018

Few had expected Donald J. Trump to be a conventional president. But even the celebrity billionaire and onetime reality TV host managed to raise eyebrows during his White House press conference with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on February 15, 2017, his first official meeting with a foreign leader after being sworn in as the forty-fifth president of the United States less than a month earlier.¹ “So I’m looking at two-state and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like,” Trump told journalists assembled in the Oval Office after the two leaders’ meeting. The president continued: “I’m very happy with the one that both parties like. I can live with either one. I thought for a while the two-state looked like it may be the easier of the two. But honestly, if Bibi and if the Palestinians—if Israel and the Palestinians are happy—I’m happy with the one they like the best.”² The president’s words took many in the room by surprise, including Netanyahu, who let out an audible chuckle.

THE TRUMP ERA: FROM AMBIVALENCE TO INDIFFERENCE

The president's remarks were more than a mere slip of the tongue or a sign of the steep learning curve that lay ahead for him on the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even as Trump continued to express a desire to broker what he called the "deal of the century," the Trump era signaled a notable shift in U.S. policy from ambivalence toward Palestinian leaders and Palestinian statehood to total indifference. Trump's leanings had been fairly clear from the outset. As a candidate, Trump pledged to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, a longstanding demand of Evangelicals and other conservative elements of Trump's electoral base. Trump had cultivated a close relationship with the billionaire casino mogul Sheldon Adelson, a fan and funder of far-right Israeli causes who has also funneled tens of millions into Trump's and other Republican campaigns and has maintained a direct line to the president.³

Once Trump was in office, his administration adopted a decidedly more lax attitude toward Israeli settlements than its predecessors. Despite urging Israel to "hold back" on settlement construction, the White House also said, "We don't believe the existence of settlements is an impediment to peace."⁴ Meanwhile, all three members of Trump's Middle East peace team—the president's son-in-law and senior adviser, Jared Kushner; his chief negotiator, Jason Greenblatt; and the newly appointed U.S. ambassador to Israel, David Friedman—were associated with the Israeli right and were reported to have substantial ties to the Israeli settler movement.⁵ This was especially true of Friedman, whose references to Israel's "alleged occupation" of the West Bank and frequent advocacy on behalf of Israeli settlers and settlements alarmed Palestinians and much of the international community.⁶ For the first twenty months of his presidency Trump declined to explicitly back Palestinian statehood before finally offering a halfhearted endorsement in September 2018: "I like [a] two-state solution. That's what I think works best. That's my feeling. Now you may have a different feeling. I don't think so. But I think [a] two-state solution works best."⁷

Despite serious misgivings about Trump, Abbas initially sought to ingratiate himself with the new president and present himself as a responsible peace partner. For the first ten months of the administration, Abbas and others within his circle heaped praise on Trump and welcomed the president's desire to broker the "ultimate deal" as a "historic opportunity" for peace.⁸ Only after the PLO mission in Washington was notified by the State Department on November 17, 2017, that it was in violation of U.S. law and could soon be forced to close did the Palestinians begin to reconsider. The move apparently was triggered by comments made by Abbas several weeks earlier before the UN General Assembly in which he urged the International Criminal Court to investigate Israel and thus ran afoul of the 2015 law requiring the president to close down the PLO office unless the Palestinians rescinded their actions and entered into direct negotiations with Israel. By this time Palestinian officials were girding themselves for much worse news.

The decisive moment came on December 6, 2017. After weeks of speculation, Trump announced that the United States officially recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and would soon move its embassy there as well, thus fulfilling a major campaign pledge. This would take the issue of Jerusalem "off the table," Trump tweeted on January 18.⁹ Not since Harry Truman defied the State Department and his intelligence community by recognizing Israel in May 1948 had a U.S. president decided such a weighty and consequential foreign policy matter almost entirely on the basis of domestic political considerations. In addition to overturning seventy years of official U.S. policy and international consensus, Trump's Jerusalem declaration marked a new low in American-Palestinian relations and called into question the United States' future role in the peace process. As one of the thorniest issues of the conflict and a powerful religious and cultural symbol for the three monotheistic faiths, the status of Jerusalem had long been seen as key to an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. The timing of the announcement was all the more puzzling coming after several months of intensive U.S. diplomacy between Israeli and Palestinian leaders in preparation for putting forward a major peace initiative.

Netanyahu and other Israeli officials hailed Trump's announcement as a victory for the Jewish people, while Palestinian leaders expressed shock and outrage. A furious Abbas announced that the United States had disqualified itself from serving as a peace broker and severed official ties with the administration. Abbas's boycott of Washington did not extend to Palestinian security and intelligence officials, however, who continued to meet with their American counterparts.¹⁰ Despite Abbas's boycott, the administration said it would press ahead with its peace initiative. The Palestinians would be given a "cooling-off period" while key Arab allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia were expected to apply pressure on Abbas to return to the negotiating table. If push came to shove, the administration believed, Arab states could be counted on to move forward without the Palestinians—the so-called "outside in" approach long favored by Israel. The Palestinian leader showed no signs of softening his stance, however, which only grew angrier and more belligerent over time. Trump retaliated by cutting U.S. assistance to UNRWA (United Nations Relief Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), the UN agency responsible for providing services to some five million Palestinian refugees, by nearly 80 percent and promised further aid cuts if the Palestinians persisted in boycotting the United States. Up until then, the United States had been the largest single donor to UNRWA, in part out of a sense of moral responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem in 1948.

Meanwhile, the embassy move was accompanied by violence, further hardening positions on both sides. Administration officials chose to inaugurate the new U.S. embassy in Jerusalem on May 14, the seventieth anniversary of Israel's independence and the day Palestinians commemorate the Nakba. That same day at least sixty Palestinian protesters demonstrating at the Gaza border fence were killed by Israeli forces, making it the deadliest day in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the 2014 Gaza war. The specter of U.S. officials, including Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump, celebrating in Jerusalem as dozens of Palestinians were being killed less than sixty miles away seemed to illustrate how far removed the administration was from the realities of the conflict. As Israel faced a torrent of international criticism for its use of

deadly force against largely unarmed protesters, the White House declined even to make the customary call on the Israelis to exercise restraint. “The responsibility for these tragic deaths rests squarely with Hamas,” declared Press Secretary Raj Shah. Echoing the Israeli government line, Shah added, “Hamas is intentionally and cynically provoking this response. And as the Secretary of State said, Israel has the right to defend itself.”¹¹

Things went downhill from there. In late August, the White House announced it was cutting all \$200 million in economic aid projects for the West Bank and Gaza, while leaving intact \$60 million in U.S. assistance for Palestinian security coordination with Israel. According to a State Department spokesperson, Heather Nauert, continued funding for the Palestinians, which amounted to roughly one-tenth of the amount provided to Israel, was “not in the best interests of the U.S. national interest” and “does not provide value to the U.S. taxpayer.”¹² Several days later the administration announced it was eliminating all remaining assistance to UNRWA as well as other humanitarian projects for the Palestinians. In response to the sudden aid cuts, the PLO’s former ambassador in Washington, Husam Zomlot, accused the Trump administration of “weaponizing humanitarian and developmental aid as political blackmail” and of “dismantling decades of US vision and engagement in Palestine.” The administration said the aid cuts were intended to force the Palestinians back to the negotiating table. However, the decision to defund UNRWA appears to be part of a broader effort by the administration and various congressional Republicans to “disrupt UNRWA” with the aim of eliminating the refugee status of millions of Palestinians in order to take the refugee issue “off the table.”¹³

SQUARING THE CIRCLE

Trump’s radical policy reversals on Jerusalem and refugees were not so much a “new approach” to resolving the conflict, as his administration has claimed, as they were the culmination of the old approach. The original laws requiring the relocation of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and the closure of the PLO office were enacted in 1995 and 1994,

respectively, at the height of the Oslo process. These laws were themselves descendants of an earlier generation of anti-PLO laws dating back to the mid-1980s and ultimately to Henry Kissinger's 1975 Memorandum of Agreement with Israel. Moreover, Trump likely could not have taken such drastic leaps had his predecessors not already paved the way for him. Long before Trump arrived in the White House, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and other presidents going back to Lyndon Johnson had already been working to sideline the issue of Palestinian refugee rights. Likewise, years of steadily chipping away at UN Security Council Resolution 242 and the "land-for-peace" formula by lending tacit approval to Israeli settlement construction in East Jerusalem and other areas beyond Israel's 1967 borders were bound to take a toll. Indeed, there was historical precedent for pursuing a peace process while ignoring the basic ground rules of that peace process. A similar process occurred between 1948 and 1967 with regard to the Palestinian refugee problem and Resolution 194, both of which were seen as central to an Arab-Israeli peace settlement but were deferred at Israel's behest before eventually being denied altogether. Successive U.S. administrations have upheld Resolution 242 and the primacy of the 1967 lines as pillars of the peace process even as they simultaneously poked holes in them on Israel's behalf. Both Clinton and Bush decried Israeli settlements as obstacles to peace, only to carve out major exemptions that allowed Israel to continue building in East Jerusalem, the large settlement blocs, and other sensitive areas of the West Bank. Both Democratic and Republican administrations have called for an Israeli withdrawal and the creation of an independent Palestinian state but have consistently avoided challenging Israel's occupation.

If past U.S. presidents have spent most of the last quarter century trying to square a circle, Trump seems content to simply call the square a circle. Trump's peace team has kept a close hold on the contents of its much-touted peace plan, which has already been delayed several times since the Jerusalem announcement. (As of this writing, the plan is scheduled to be released in March 2019.) Regardless of when—or if—the plan is released, it is clearly not going to be based on the old rules of the peace process. Despite the president's back-handed support for a

two-state solution, the Trump administration has avoided referring to Security Council Resolution 242 or calling for ending Israel's occupation. In addition, leaked details of the plan suggest something much less than a sovereign Palestinian state. The plan reportedly hinges on the creation of a Palestinian entity made up of noncontiguous patches of West Bank territory in return for massive international aid and economic assistance.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the decision by the State Department to drop references to the West Bank and Gaza Strip as "occupied territories" from its annual human rights reports suggested that occupation denial, once the purview of the fringes of the Israeli and American right, is steadily becoming normalized at the official level.¹⁵

Even though the prospects of an American-brokered peace deal were already slim before Trump's arrival, his policies may have finally convinced Palestinian leaders that they have more to lose from remaining in an American-sponsored peace process than from walking away from it. To go along with a peace process in which neither Jerusalem, refugees, nor genuine sovereignty are on the table would likely eliminate what little remained of Abbas's credibility among Palestinians. On the other hand, continuing to boycott the United States effectively pulls the plug on the PLO's diplomatic strategy for more than three decades while potentially inviting even more punitive action from a volatile American president. Even if American officials manage to convince, or coerce, Abbas back to the negotiating table—which seems doubtful absent a major reversal in U.S. policy—it is unlikely he would be in a position domestically to sign a peace agreement, much less implement one.

Abbas's dilemma highlights the basic flaws of the U.S.-led peace process over the last quarter century. Through its ever-expanding arsenal of sticks and the gradual erosion of the diplomatic ground rules, Washington steadily increased the costs of Palestinian participation in the peace process while simultaneously diminishing its value. Persistent threats, pressure, and attempts to reorganize Palestinian political and institutional life succeeded in making Palestinian leaders more pliant but left them too weak to serve as effective negotiating partners. It was perhaps inevitable that Palestinians, as the weakest party in the

negotiations, would bear the brunt of the chronic failures of the peace process, but the results have been equally destructive for the goal of a two-state solution. Instead of building a sound basis for a Palestinian state, the peace process has helped to reinforce Palestinian political fragmentation and weaken Palestinian governing institutions, with the notable exception of the PA's security apparatus in the West Bank. In those areas where the PA does not operate, and which were also exempted from the peace process—namely East Jerusalem and Gaza—instability and violence became the norm.

At the same time, the seemingly endless supply of carrots did not make Israeli leaders more amenable to compromise or encourage them to take risks for peace, but instead provided means to defray the political, economic, and even military costs of the occupation. In the absence of American or international pressure and any meaningful forms of accountability, Israeli leaders had no incentive to undertake the difficult and politically unpopular decisions that a two-state solution required, such as evacuating Jewish settlements, transferring territory to Palestinian sovereignty, and dividing Jerusalem. Although U.S. policymakers often lose sight of the fact, the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians is not just one of conflict; it is also a military occupation. Although one cannot completely level the playing field, effective mediation requires leverage with and accountability for *both* parties, not just the weaker one. By focusing on reassuring Israelis and reforming the Palestinians, rather than on challenging the dynamics that sustained the conflict—particularly Israel's ongoing occupation—U.S. mediation helped to reinforce, and even institutionalize, the vast power imbalance between the two sides and to preserve the status quo of the Israeli occupation. The questions of Palestinian political reforms, institution building, and economic development are worthy and necessary for Palestinians and even international donors to engage in. But they are not the primary drivers of the conflict or the reasons for Israel's lingering occupation in the way that Israel's ongoing denial of Palestinian human, civil, and political rights have been.

As a superpower and Israel's closest ally, the United States was uniquely positioned to broker peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

As a peace process veteran, Aaron David Miller, put it, “We, the United States, may not be an honest broker, but we can be an effective broker.”¹⁶ This assumed, however, that American presidents would be willing to set aside the “special relationship” with Israel and domestic political pressures, if only momentarily, on those issues that mattered most. This was rarely the case even before Trump took office. “The problem in resolving the Palestinian conflict is not between Israelis and Palestinians; it’s inside of Washington,” observed Bruce Riedel, a former CIA analyst who also served in the Clinton White House. “The real problem is the American deeply held position [of] Israel right or wrong.”¹⁷ In that sense, it would seem that American domestic politics have been at least as much an impediment to the success of the peace process as the “political cultures” of Israelis or Palestinians.

The persistence of Washington’s blind spot regarding both Palestinian politics and Israeli power throughout its management of the peace process led to several costly mistakes and missed opportunities: Bill Clinton’s decision to pin blame for the failure at Camp David summit and the spiraling violence of the Al-Aqsa Intifada solely on Arafat and the Palestinians; George W. Bush’s passive response to the destruction of Palestinian political and governing institutions at the hands of Ariel Sharon and the IDF; the abandonment of the roadmap and its emphasis on parallel implementation on mutual accountability; the failure to capitalize on the election of President Mahmoud Abbas and the dramatic decline in violence in 2005; Barack Obama’s unwillingness to challenge Israeli settlement expansion, the destabilizing Gaza blockade, and other negative trends that threatened the two-state solution.

To be sure, the Palestinians also carry blame for the impasse. Arafat’s leadership cynically used violence and calculated chaos during the Intifada to convince the world of his relevance, although it generally achieved the opposite. Likewise, the willingness of Hamas and other armed factions to engage in violence against Israeli civilians eroded international sympathy for the Palestinian cause and played directly to Israel’s strengths, namely its vaunted military prowess. Perhaps most damaging of all has been the internecine schism between Fatah and Hamas, which has paralyzed internal Palestinian politics and fostered

violence and instability and also has been easily exploited by the Israelis to delay political progress. So long as Palestinian political actors, whether secular or Islamist, continue to prioritize their own partisan and parochial priorities over the interests of the wider Palestinian public, it is difficult to imagine any meaningful change in the condition of Palestinians on the ground.

Moreover, the fact that American policymakers still viewed the Palestinian cause almost exclusively through the lens of Israel and the peace process was not purely a function of Washington's blind spot; it was also a matter of official PLO strategy. Trump's attempts to rewrite the rules of the peace process have exposed the limits of the PLO's three-decades-old "American" strategy and forced many within Palestinian officialdom to rethink that strategy. In a June 2018 address at a West Bank university, the PLO's former representative to Washington, Husam Zomlot, described the decision to accept American mediation without first insisting on normalizing U.S.-Palestinian ties, including reversing the group's official terrorist designation, as a "historic mistake" on the part of the PLO. "It makes no sense for [the United States] to be a mediator between a 'strategic ally' and a 'terrorist.' This means you are not a mediator."¹⁸ Indeed, the PLO leadership's overreliance on American deliverance seems to have come at the expense of Palestinian agency and initiative. "There's nothing bilateral about our relationship with the United States," says the former Palestinian premier Salam Fayyad. "We are incidental really. It was because of their interest in Israel. We sort of got in the way, and so they had to deal with us."¹⁹

But power dynamics are not everything, insists Fayyad. In his view, it is more important "to matter to Americans ideologically and morally. Only then could you become significant, regardless of having much less influence or power." For Fayyad, this means "encroaching on the domain of 'shared values' that Israel has virtually monopolized and projecting Palestinian aspirations, needs, and interests in ways that resonate with the narrative and worldview of ordinary Americans, appealing to the sense of fairness that Americans pride themselves on, rejection of inequality, support for the underdog, in addition to the way we govern ourselves and the idea of government by the people, for the people, and

of the people.” He continues, “If it’s a matter of religion or ‘Judeo-Christian heritage,’ we really cannot compete. But the idea of living as a free people with dignity in a state of their own, that is something most Americans can relate to.”²⁰ There are signs that such appeals are already beginning to resonate among segments of the American public.

A CHANGING AMERICAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The Trump administration’s inability to clearly endorse Palestinian statehood or acknowledge Israel’s occupation points to deeper changes both inside the Republican Party and the American political landscape as a whole and a widening partisan divide over Israel and Palestine. Reflecting its steady shift to the right in recent years, the Republican Party formally expunged references to a two-state solution from its 2016 platform while noting that the party “reject[s] the false notion that Israel is an occupier.”²¹ A growing segment of the Republican base, particularly the large and influential constituency of Evangelical Christians for whom Israel and Zionism are closely tied to American identity and its presumed “Judeo-Christian” heritage, have also come to view Israel as a civilizational bulwark against Islamic radicalism.

Meanwhile, the sense of triumphalism that has pervaded much of Israeli politics is also evident on the American right. For example, the so-called Congressional Israel Victory Caucus, launched in April 2016 by a group of Republican Congress members, promotes the theory that, as the Jewish American historian Daniel Pipes puts it, “Palestinians will have to pass through the bitter crucible of defeat, with all its deprivation, destruction and despair, before the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be resolved.”²² Such sentiment was reminiscent of the view of the New York congressman Walter Marion Chandler, who insisted almost a century earlier that Palestinian Arabs must “consent to Jewish government and domination” lest they “be driven from Palestine by force.”²³

A parallel, if less dramatic, shift also appears to be under way among Democrats, but in the opposite direction. Although support for Israel within the Democratic Party remains strong, the protracted nature of

the conflict and the brutality of Israel's occupation have led growing numbers of the party's rank and file—younger, progressive, female voters, people of color, and liberal Jews—to question U.S. policies they see as facilitating Israeli violations of Palestinian rights and as incompatible with American values. These changes have begun to percolate from the grassroots up through the party establishment. Issues that have long been uncontested, such as calling for the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and avoiding mention of the Israeli occupation, are now being openly debated by party delegates for the first time, as occurred during the 2012 and 2016 Democratic National Committee platform debates.²⁴

By 2016, the trend had made its way into presidential politics in the form of Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign. As both Hillary Clinton and the Republican pool of candidates offered up the usual platitudes and often hyperbolic praise for Israel, Sanders put forth a considerably more nuanced perspective that emphasized not only the need to safeguard Israeli security but also Palestinian rights. The United States "cannot continue to be one-sided. There are two sides to the issue," observed Sanders in the fifth Clinton-Sanders debate, adding that "in the long run if we are ever going to bring peace to that region which has seen so much hatred and so much war, we are going to have to treat the Palestinian people with respect and dignity."²⁵ The fact that Sanders made these remarks during a nationally televised Democratic debate with Clinton before an audience in Brooklyn, New York, seemed to defy the conventional wisdom about what could or could not be said in relation to Israel and Palestine in the context of American politics. The relative overall success of the Sanders campaign and his continued outspokenness on Israel and Palestine suggested that there now existed a political constituency that was willing to reward candidates for taking up the issue of Palestinian rights, instead of punishing them.

Peter Beinart, a leading voice of the American Jewish left, credits Sanders with fundamentally transforming Washington's political culture on Israel-Palestine by taking criticism of Israel into the political mainstream. In June 2018 Beinart wrote: "While Obama, Kerry and Clinton did sometimes criticize Israeli policy, they generally did so in

the language of Israeli self-interest, not of Palestinian human rights. Israeli settlement policy was bad for Israel, they argued, because it threatened Israel's future as a democratic Jewish state." By contrast, Beinart continued, "Sanders is betting that the political ground has shifted. In a sense, he's doing in the Democratic Party what Trump has done inside the GOP. For years, polls showed that ordinary Republicans were moving away from their party's elite on trade and immigration. But until Trump, no Republican presidential frontrunner had been sufficiently unconventional and sufficiently unafraid to put that proposition to the test. That's what Sanders is doing on Israel."²⁶

There are signs that this trend may also be making inroads in Congress, long considered the epicenter of pro-Israel sentiment in American politics. Today, organizations on the right and center-right such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Zionist Organization of America have competition from left-liberal Zionist groups such as J Street, the New Israel Fund, and the Israel Policy Forum. Growing numbers of congressional progressives are prepared to ignore the pro-Israel lobby entirely, including Congresswoman Betty McCollum of Minnesota, who along with twenty of her fellow Democrats sponsored a bill aimed at ending Israeli military detentions of Palestinian children. Although the bill stood little chance of becoming law, it was notable for being the first bill dealing with Palestinian human rights ever introduced in Congress.²⁷ In October 2018, 112 members of the U.S. House of Representatives and 34 U.S. Senators signed a letter to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urging the administration to rescind its recent aid cuts to UNRWA, Jerusalem hospitals, and other Palestinian institutions.²⁸ Much as Edward Bliss Reed urged Congress to oppose the Balfour Declaration as being incompatible with American support for self-determination in 1922, growing numbers of Democratic politicians and activists are framing the current debate on Israel and Palestine in terms of American values. A senior congressional aide told me in August 2018, "In 2016, the Democratic [Party] debate was over the word 'occupation.' In 2020, the debate will be over the word 'apartheid.'" While such sentiment may seem dramatic, the

growing partisan divide on Israel and Palestine has undoubtedly opened up the space for debate within U.S. politics.

NEITHER TWO STATES NOR ONE

The days of an exclusively American-dominated peace process are probably behind us. The questions now are whether a two-state solution and the Palestinian Authority can survive in the absence of a U.S.-led peace process, and what, if anything, might replace them, and the United States as an honest broker. Since announcing his boycott of the United States, Abbas has pledged to put the Palestinian file in the hands of the United Nations and has also appealed to other major powers such as the EU, France, Russia, and China to step up to the plate as mediators. Although these actors all have the potential to play an enhanced role in Arab-Israeli peacemaking, none currently has the necessary clout with both sides to serve as a credible alternative to American mediation. Meanwhile, in the international community achieving a two-state solution in Palestine has taken a backseat to other priorities such as international terrorism, the global refugee crisis, Iran, the Syrian civil war, and the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen. And for many of the Palestinians' traditional Arab allies, such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan, the Palestinian issue no longer seems to be a priority or an impediment to establishing security and economic ties with Israel.

In the meantime, Abbas has pledged to forge ahead with his internationalization campaign by joining various treaties and international bodies. These may provide the embattled Palestinian leader with some momentary relief domestically, although there are already signs that such tactics are losing steam with his domestic constituency. Moreover, such measures are unlikely to produce any tangible changes on the ground over the longer term, particularly in light of continuing Palestinian disunity and the absence of a broader political strategy for all Palestinians, including the refugees and others of the diaspora.

Meanwhile, the future of the Palestinian Authority grows more precarious by the day. Abbas and other Palestinian leaders have often threatened to "hand over the keys" to Israel by voluntarily dissolving the

PA, in an attempt to force Israel to either change its behavior in the occupied territories or assume its responsibilities for governing them directly. Although this seems unlikely, any number of internal and external factors could lead to the PA's eventual collapse, including a precipitous drop in international donor aid, which now stands at nearly half of what it was in 2013.²⁹ The Trump administration's aid cuts could accelerate the PA's demise. At the same time, uncertainty over who (or what) might succeed the aging President Abbas raises the specter of a protracted power struggle within Fatah and perhaps even renewed Hamas-Fatah fighting. An ever-worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza, exacerbated by the stalled internal reconciliation process and new sanctions on Gaza's population imposed by Abbas's leadership in Ramallah, adds yet another layer of instability. Since Abbas's decision in March 2017 to slash the salaries of PA employees and halt fuel payments to Israel that supply Gaza with electricity, Gaza has teetered on the edge of war. A new war between Israel and Hamas would not only be catastrophic for Gaza's civilian population but also could prove highly destabilizing for the already unpopular Abbas. This is in addition to the episodic violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Although a sustained popular mobilization seems unlikely, given the fractured state of Palestinian politics, if and when conditions allow for a "third Intifada," it may be directed as much at Palestinian leaders as at the Israeli occupation. The broader question of whether the PA's continued existence was facilitating the goal of independence or the status quo is one that will ultimately be decided by the Palestinians themselves. The answer to that question will depend in large part on the ability of current or future Palestinian leaders to articulate an alternative vision, which does not yet exist.

However it may come about, the collapse of the PA would represent the most tangible—and most likely fatal—blow yet to the goal of two states. As we have seen, the precarious political consensuses within Israeli, Palestinian, and even American politics that have kept the two-state solution afloat since the 1990s are already crumbling. In Israel, a majority of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ruling coalition openly opposes the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state in the West

Bank and Gaza Strip, while Israel's parliament, the Knesset, seems to be inching toward a policy of annexing the occupied territories.³⁰ Although polls still show a plurality of Israelis support the goal of two states, the Israeli public is more concerned with economic matters and external threats from Iran than with a resolution of the Palestinian issue.³¹

Support for a two-state solution is also waning among Palestinians in the occupied territories, traditionally the constituency that has been the most supportive of a two-state solution. Growing numbers of Palestinians, particularly those who came of age during the Oslo years, are abandoning the goal of Palestinian statehood in favor of a struggle for equal rights in a single state.³² Among those who have lost faith in the "Oslo generation" is Tareq Abbas, the son of the Palestinian president. "If you don't want to give me independence, at least give me civil rights," the younger Abbas told the *New York Times*. "That's an easier way, peaceful way. I don't want to throw anything, I don't want to hate anybody, I don't want to shoot anybody. I want to be under the law."³³ Such sentiments, while increasingly pervasive, have not yet been translated into a concrete political program.

Despite the growing appeal of "one person, one vote" among Palestinians, there is currently no organized political movement or actor pushing in that direction on the Palestinian scene. This may have to do with the fragmented nature of Palestinian politics writ large, and thus could change with time. Even Hamas, which has a long history of violent opposition to the Oslo process and which rejects any recognition of Israel, has steadily come to terms with a Palestinian state in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza Strip.³⁴ The fact that the vast majority of Israeli Jews remain opposed to the idea would suggest that a single, binational state is not yet politically viable. Any future resolution, whether based on a partition of the land or on some form of binationalism—or any of the possible options in between, such as confederation—should allow both Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs the basic right of self-determination. Conversely, any proposal or initiative that allows for the continued domination or subjugation of one group by the other is bound to fail and is likely to prolong the conflict. In the meantime, the ambiguous status quo, which allows for neither

two states nor one state, is likely to continue indefinitely, perhaps until a major crisis forces a reshuffling of the political and diplomatic cards, as happened after the 1948 and 1967 wars.

For many, particularly those on the Israeli and American right, the status quo may seem like a tolerable, or perhaps even preferable, outcome. Given the century-long history of the conflict, however, there is little reason to expect things to remain as they are permanently. Nor would the demise of a two-state solution be entirely cost-free for the United States. Periodic outbursts of violence in Gaza and East Jerusalem may become less manageable and more costly for Israel, particularly if the void left by receding Palestinian politics and national institutions is filled by jihadists and other nihilist groups. The increasing prominence of nonviolent forms of mobilization by Palestinians and their supporters poses an entirely different set of challenges for which the Israeli military historically has been ill-equipped. The growing profile of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement is particularly worrisome to Israel's leaders, as evidenced by the proliferation of legislative initiatives aimed at outlawing or otherwise prohibiting boycott efforts that target Israel or Israeli settlements.³⁵ The emergence of the BDS movement, founded in 2005 in response to a call by Palestinian civil society groups, was in many ways itself an outgrowth of the twin failings of the peace process—the failure of Palestinian leaders to effectively challenge the occupation and the absence of any meaningful constraints or accountability for Israel.

The prospect of Israel's maintaining indefinite control over millions of stateless Palestinians while denying them citizenship and other basic social and political rights raises difficult questions for American politicians as well. In his valedictory speech, former Secretary of State John Kerry, himself a committed supporter of Israel, summed up the dilemma facing the two countries: "How does Israel reconcile a permanent occupation with its democratic ideals? How does the U.S. continue to defend that and still live up to our own democratic ideals? Nobody has ever provided good answers to those questions because there aren't any."

Peace between Israelis and Palestinians seems more distant than ever, and the rising generation on both sides of the conflict has grown

increasingly skeptical of negotiations. The end of the Oslo process and the decline of Palestinian politics have left an uneasy political and diplomatic vacuum that may not be filled anytime soon. On the other hand, the demise of what had been an outdated and highly ineffective peace process offers an opportunity to rethink old assumptions, formulas, and possible solutions. However, if the United States is ever to resume its preeminent role as a peace broker between Israelis and Palestinians, American policymakers will need to grapple with the basic realities of the conflict, including the corrosive and destabilizing effects of Israel's continued occupation and the need for a credible and cohesive Palestinian political leadership. Unless and until the United States can overcome its blind spot to Israeli power and Palestinian politics, its policies will be doomed to failure.