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After the Carnage

Solutions crafted by outsiders to avoid, suppress, and restrict Palestinian agency are bound to fail. Palestinians should decide their own future.

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Amid the carnage of Israel's war on Gaza, litigating the parameters of a post-apartheid future may seem frivolous. Still, the events of the past months have rekindled interest in a political solution, even among leaders who had largely ignored the ever-deteriorating circumstances of Palestinian life prior to October 7. Whether in the framing of Israel's allies in the West who center Israeli-Jewish security or in the recognition by the rest that it is the prevailing geography of power between the river and the sea that drives Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation, there has been a default to the principle of "two states for two peoples" on the territory of historic Palestine.

The "two-state solution" can, of course, be a capacious formulation. The original 1947 edition envisaged awarding 55 percent of the land to a "Jewish state" and a contiguous 45 percent to an "Arab state," with Jerusalem and its environs under separate international governance. Today, in the minds of some advocates, it means sovereign independence for Palestinians on borders demarcated by the 1949 Armistice lines, aka "the 1967 borders" meaning a noncontiguous 22 percent of historic Palestine comprising the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital. To others—including, it seems, the Biden administration—the two-state solution means rebranding some version of today's occupation map as a Palestinian "state" that's neither sovereign nor independent. It's a two-state "solution" stripped of Palestinian liberatory aspirations and historical redress, and it is sufficiently close to the status quo to be potentially acceptable to elements of an Israeli polity that has never accepted Palestinian sovereignty.

But despite the substantial differences between these imagined futures, all assume that resolving conflict between 7 million Jewish Israelis and the 7 million Palestinians currently living under Israeli control (and even the approximately 9 million in exile) requires partitioning the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. There is, of course, no prospect in the foreseeable future of Israel's leaders or its public accepting a genuine end to the occupation. Israel's calculations might change if its Western backers withdrew the unconditional impunity that guards Israel against global demands for accountability or if the battlefield balance of forces continues to [shift against Israel](#). But a major change is not on the short-term horizon. It, nonetheless, remains important to parse the matter, since Israelis and Palestinians have been living with the brutal consequences of the partition of Palestine since the United Nations authorized it over 75 years ago.

If there's a thread of continuity that runs from the 1947 UN proposal that effectively legitimized the Nakba that followed to the two-state imaginary of the Biden administration, it is the assumption that the Palestinian people have neither the ability nor the right to speak for themselves or choose their national destiny. As in colonial times when Western empires conjured up nation-states and installed handpicked rulers to govern their populations in accordance with Western needs, so are "solutions" to be imposed on the colonized people of Palestine.

There'd be no reason for serious people to read the musings of *New York Times* foreign-policy hack Thomas Friedman—whose abysmal track record of failed Middle East clairvoyancy speaks for itself—but for the fact that President [Joe Biden takes him seriously](#). For that reason alone it's worth interrogating [Friedman's explanation](#) of how the Biden administration could deploy two-state rebranding to pacify the Palestinian challenge to Israeli apartheid.

Having failed to read the coroner's report on the reasons for its demise and apparently believing that the fetid corpse of the Oslo "peace process" isn't quite dead, Friedman proposes applying a defibrillator in the form of "an unprecedented U.S. diplomatic initiative to promote a Palestinian state—NOW."

The plan, writes Friedman, "would involve some form of U.S. recognition of a demilitarized Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip that would come into being only once Palestinians had developed a set of defined, credible institutions and security capabilities to ensure that this state was viable and that it could never threaten Israel." US officials have also clarified that any such recognition would be granted only in coordination with Israel.

The incentive for Israel to embrace Friedman's vision is the quid pro quo of Saudi Arabia normalizing ties.

The most interesting thing about the shopworn fantasy is its shameless racism: In Friedman's schema, Palestinians are not worthy of self-determination.

The "state" that the United States would recognize would not be a state at all; it would be a kind of Lego-set version of one. "Demilitarized" is code for denying Palestinians sovereign independence; it means that the same Israeli forces waging war on Palestinians would maintain security control. Friedman proposes a gaudy makeover of today's Palestinian Authority on the West Bank (its remit now potentially to be reimposed on the pulverized hellscape that is Gaza) as a "state." Optimally, the Israeli "burden" of occupation would now be shared by the US and its Arab allies.

Clearly, Friedman is unable to digest the reality that the PA's corruption and extreme lack of popular legitimacy are, in fact, both functions of the principal purpose it serves—and which Friedman insists any Palestinian state must serve—which is to protect Israel from any Palestinian resistance to occupation and dispossession. The analogy would be to the toy-telephone "statehood" that South Africa's apartheid regime granted to four of the Bantustans over which it maintained control. No wonder, perhaps, that the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, the most reliable Palestinian polling organization, [finds](#) that 83 percent of Palestinians don't take seriously US proclamations about Palestinian statehood.

The terms for statehood listed by Friedman are, in fact, exactly those to which the PA design that emerged from the Oslo process conformed, and they are why Oslo failed to deliver peace,

freedom, or security. The PA has never been a vehicle for Palestinian liberation; Israel needed it only to manage the occupation status quo. Friedman’s proposed “Palestinian state”—which would be neither truly a state nor representative of Palestinians—couldn’t expect a mandate from the Palestinians themselves, because it would represent nothing more than the institutionalized form of Palestinian surrender.

As president, Biden has failed to reverse most of Donald Trump’s “concessions” to Israel, from recognizing its annexation of the Golan Heights and moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem to prioritizing so-called normalization, in this instance Saudi-Israeli rapprochement as the key to resolving Israeli-Palestinian conflict. (Biden has even implemented the Trump-Netanyahu goal of defunding UNRWA.) The rights, aspirations, and choices of the Palestinians as a dispossessed people simply don’t feature in the Biden administration’s thinking.

The colonial approach of talking *about* the Palestinians rather than talking with and listening to them is helped by the confused state of Palestinian politics; there’s no single body with sufficient political standing to represent Palestinians or convey a national consensus. That’s not to endorse Biden’s deluded hopes of excluding Hamas from the future Palestinian political landscape. The movement did, after all, win the only Palestinian elections held this century, garnering 44 percent of the vote in 2006 Legislative Council elections that were limited to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where Hamas [remains the most popular Palestinian political party](#). Of course, many Palestinians support other political tendencies, but PCSPR polling shows Hamas carrying a similar plurality in any new election. The only Palestinian leader who polled better than Hamas Chairman Ismail Haniyeh in the survey is former West Bank Fatah political campaigner Marwan Barghouti, imprisoned for life by Israel. Barghouti may be the most popular Palestinian leader, but his politics of resistance, his leading role in forging national unity across factions from inside prison, and the fact that he tops the list of prisoners Hamas is seeking to exchange for Israeli hostages suggest he’s not the sort of alternative to Hamas that Biden has in mind.

Hence the present vacuum: The most popular Palestinian party is deemed beyond the pale by Israel and its allies; the single most popular Palestinian leader remains in prison; Israel and the US have worked to prevent any democratic political life in Palestinian society; and international institutions recognize the PA “state of Palestine” as the representative voice of Palestinians, despite its total lack of popular legitimacy.

A vital debate is currently underway among [activists](#) throughout Palestinian society to shape a program of national unity and credible, representative institutions to advance their struggle for liberation. Palestinians will decide whether the Palestinian Liberation Organization can be rescued from its collapse into the PA democratized and resuscitated as a vehicle of struggle in line with its name, or whether it will be replaced—but whatever new formation emerges to express Palestinian unity and pursuit of freedom, it will almost certainly exist outside of a collaborationist entity that flies the national flag but has long since abandoned the national project.

Legitimacy is beyond the reach of any Palestinian institution defined by US-Israeli expectations, because those expectations require Palestinian acceptance of their historic humiliation, dispossession, and subjugation.

But the source of legitimacy for the Biden-Friedman plans for Palestine is not Palestinian at all; it depends on Saudi Arabia and other Arab states' assuming responsibility for an occupied Arab people on behalf of Israel and the US. One might ask how a Saudi embrace of Israel would quiet Palestinian resistance to colonization, except to do even that would be to assume, without evidence, that Saudi Arabia would follow a US script rather than charting its own geopolitical course in a rapidly changing global order that has seen a steady decline in US influence.

In the Biden-Friedman scheme, Palestinians will not be consulted. They will be bludgeoned, bullied, and bribed into accepting a decades-old apartheid—because it will be presented to them as the only route to staying alive. The proposal is for Palestinians to be fed and housed in a refugee camp now called a “state” as Israeli drones circle overhead day and night.

Unlike the Biden administration, Israel's leaders are inclined to imagine local Palestinian gang leaders in Gaza alongside PA bureaucrats in the West Bank administering tiny fiefdoms in the remnants of Palestine on behalf of its occupier. Most Israeli politicians don't want to concede even the Halloween-store accoutrements of cosplay statehood. But the differences between Biden and Netanyahu on this point are more sartorial than substantial. Biden is saying, “Just call it a state, man,” and Bibi is saying, “I can't do that right now.” But both know that “it” is not a state in any meaningful sense; it's a Bantustan.

Netanyahu made that clear at Bar Ilan in 2009 at a time when he believed that keeping the Western powers on his side required some terminological sophistry. His speech set out a plan for Bantustans, but he used the term “Palestinian state.” (Shortly thereafter, Netanyahu's father and ideological mentor Ben-Zion explained that what Bibi meant by a state was nothing the Palestinians could ever accept, and that the conservative base shouldn't worry their pretty little heads about what his son had said to appease the Americans.) Bibi has since disavowed the use of the word “state,” [as has Israeli war cabinet member and putative alternative leader Benny Gantz](#). So the difference between Biden and Bibi is basically over what to call the Bantustan. And either version is untenable and a recipe for future violence.

What is worth calling out, however, is how ignoring Palestinians' right to speak and to choose their own leaders is deemed acceptable in liberal Western political and media discourse. Palestinian freedom is entirely outside the frame of the Overton window through which Western powers view the Palestinian question.

Israel's backers might believe they're helping its cause by supporting this two-state peace process, but in reality they're doing the opposite. They're just encouraging the hubristic fantasy that Israel can achieve sustainable security at the expense of the Palestinians. The belief that Palestinian freedom aspirations can be permanently, violently suppressed contributed to Israel's political failure to anticipate the October 7 attack. Zionism as it actually exists has proven unable to offer Israel a secure future. In *The Iron Wall*, published in 1923, Vladimir Jabotinsky writes that Zionists must impose violent humiliation on the Palestinians until they reconcile themselves to their dispossession. Israeli leaders have de facto followed that strategy for more than a century, and it offers Israelis a forever war they cannot win.

The starting point for any sustainable political solution to the crisis in Palestine—whatever its final design—must be that that it is founded on respect for the right of the Palestinian people to determine their own future, including choosing their own leaders, and it must recognize the

Palestinians as a people with the right to live in freedom and dignity. That's a standard all partition processes and realities thus far have failed to meet.

A clear-eyed view of history requires confronting the fact that existing efforts to partition Palestine—starting with the 1947 two-state solution—have helped create and exacerbate rather than resolve the problem.

In 1947, Palestinian Arabs made up 68 percent of the population and owned much of the land. They were never going to voluntarily accept the dispossession and national subordination implied by the partition proposed by some distant colonial authority. Remember, the United Nations at the time was composed of 57 member states; today, it has 193. So three-quarters of today's UN member states—most of the countries of Africa and Asia—had no say on the fate of Palestine, because they were under the colonial rule of Western powers at the time. Even then, just 33 countries voted for partition; 13 voted against, and 10 abstained.

Of course, the Zionist movement, which aspired to create a Jewish ethno-state, could not live with a UN partition map whose Jewish state contained a population that was almost half Palestinian Arabs. The cynical pragmatist David Ben Gurion, however, "accepted" the partition plan (over the fierce objections of Jabotinsky, forefather of today's Likud party), in the same way that Lenin had "accepted" the treaty of Brest-Litovsk in order to get Russia out of World War I—accepting Germany's intolerable terms for ending the war as a diplomatic necessity, all the while confident that his forces would, when the time came, change the "facts on the ground."

It was an internationally mandated partition, then, that set the stage for war and ethnic cleansing to reengineer the demographics of the Jewish state and for the Zionists to expand their share of the partitioned Palestine. By mid-1949, Ben Gurion could look with satisfaction as his Jewish state controlled not the 55 percent of Palestine envisaged by the UN plan but 78 percent. Even more importantly, the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian majority from within that territory had reduced its Arab population to 20 percent—and turned the majority of Palestinians into refugees. Most Palestinians living in Gaza today are relatives of those violently expelled from Israel in 1948. The Palestinians remaining inside Israel's 1949 boundaries (the so-called '67 lines) lived under Israeli military rule until 1966, many internally displaced and dispossessed. Even today, they remain second-class citizens facing discrimination in a polity designed for Jewish supremacy.

Just as Jabotinsky had warned that Jewish "colonization" (his word) of Palestine would require an unsentimental willingness to prevail through violence over the resistance of its indigenous population, so did Moshe Dayan warn in 1956 that Israel should never expect to live in peace with the refugees it had forced into Gaza, whose hatred for the Zionist project was based on watching Israel "transforming the lands and the villages, where they and their fathers dwelt, into our estate." It's worth noting that Dayan sounded this warning in his funeral oration for Roy Ruttenberg, a kibbutznik slain by raiders from Gaza at Nahal Oz, the kibbutz where 66 Israeli soldiers and 12 civilians were killed in the Hamas-led attack on October 7.

In 1993, the Oslo process gave a second life to partition. Its effect has been to deepen and expand Israel's occupation under the protection of a US "mediation" that ignored international law in favor of its own pro-Israel policy positions. The process also bequeathed the PA, a kind of Palestinian Vichy entity whose primary task is administering and policing the cities of the Occupied Palestinian Territories on Israel's behalf. The PLO created the PA as an interim

vehicle of limited self-governance during a negotiation process that expired, in failure, a quarter-century ago. But by then, the PA had effectively consumed its host.

The zero-sum partition principle, both in 1948 and in 1993, reinforced Zionist territorial expansion. “Everyone there should move, should run, should grab more hills, expand the territory,” Israeli Foreign Minister (and later PM) Ariel Sharon said in 1998, referring to the settlers who had, in violation of international law, continued pouring into the West Bank after Oslo. “Everything that’s grabbed will be in our hands; everything that we don’t grab will be in their hands.”

The historic impact of the PA, then, has been to provide a Palestinian seal of approval on Palestinian dispossession. The Oslo Accords’ designation of territories into A, B, and C zones in the West Bank enabled continued Israeli demographic engineering and control of resource, water, and land allocation—a project most visible in the positioning of illegal civilian settlements—while deploying multiple additional mechanisms for entrenching control.

Oslo’s focus was limited to questions raised by the 1967 occupation and largely avoided dealing with the violent dispossession of 1948. Well, not quite avoided: The Israelis were, in fact, obsessed with including “end of claims” language in any final agreement—i.e., that some form of a not-quite-state in parts of the 1967 territories would somehow be sufficient to resolve the refugees, the stolen land and property, and the enduring drivers of Palestinian struggle. Israel has never been ready to engage with the Nakba, the profound trauma its creation had inflicted on the population on whose land it was built. Notions that have served processes for historic transformation out of conflict such as “truth and reconciliation” or “transitional justice” were never part of the Oslo paradigm. Not only that—Israel assumed for itself the freedom to keep expanding into Palestinian land even amid the so-called peace process. Oslo could not deliver peace because it amounted to a sugar-coated Palestinian surrender.

When Oslo expired, Israel moved on, largely indifferent to “the Palestinian question.” The next Israeli election will be the first in 20 years that will hinge on how the government should respond to the Palestinians. The bloodbath of October 7 was a traumatic shattering of the two-decade erasure of the occupation from the Israeli consciousness. But even if the Palestinians may once again be on Israel’s domestic political agenda, the apartheid consensus in the Israeli mainstream is stronger than ever. There is no fundamental divide in Israeli politics over the campaign in Gaza, which the [International Court of Justice considers](#) to be plausibly violating the Genocide Convention and the UN special rapporteur described in a report called “[Anatomy of a Genocide](#).” The next election will be a contest between leaders seeking to maintain the apartheid status quo (Gantz, Yair Lapid) versus Netanyahu-coalition allies like Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich who seek to fully remove or eradicate the Palestinian population between the river and the sea, with Netanyahu oscillating opportunistically between the two camps.

And the Biden administration is there with its own option, which it calls “the two-state solution.”

To many people of goodwill, this two-state idea sounds pragmatic, achievable, and about as fair as any policy that the Israelis might accept at this point. But as deceptively attractive as the expediency of this two-state concept may seem, pursuing it without recognizing the flaws that doomed it to failure in 1948 and again in the 1990s would be a costly mistake.

From the Nakba version to the Oslo years of expanded settlement to today's US-led proposals to stabilize postwar Gaza by rebranding today's geography of apartheid and dispossession as "a Palestinian state," efforts to partition Palestine have thus far ended in blood—some of it Israeli, mostly Palestinian.

Hence the need to caution those who wish the Palestinians well and support their quest for justice, particularly governments in the Global South, against re-endorsing this two-state principle under the present circumstances. Instead of another internationally mandated partition, the Palestinians must first be allowed to set the terms on which they will engage to secure their freedom and begin on a path to peaceful coexistence with their Jewish neighbors.

The dehumanization and zero-sum thinking reinforced by partition excuses Israeli Jews from considering any kind of alternative to eternal dread and violence. The Zionist project has focused Jewish life in Palestine on the idea that it will be eternally under existential threat and require unceasing war on Palestinians. The logic of partition also exempts Palestinian liberation discourse from the necessity of reckoning with the reality that the European and Arab Jews who moved to Israel over the past century benefited from a settler-colonial project, but they built a national community. Most Israeli Jews were born between the river and the sea and know no other home nor any future outside of the Holy Land. Any viable project to dismantle the apartheid system requires a pathway for that community to embrace a decolonized future in which they've ceded privileges and power gained and maintained at the expense of others but in which their security and well-being are guaranteed.

The Palestinian future must be decided by Palestinians and forged in struggle. In the course of forging this liberation project, Palestinians will need to engage with the permanence of the Israeli-Jewish presence. For Palestinians to not just tolerate but accept that reality has the power to disrupt the Zionist consensus by offering Jewish Israelis an alternative pathway to securing their long-term future. But the most urgent project of the moment is achieving a Palestinian national consensus on how to proceed. So long as the likes of Biden and Friedman can persuade others that no Palestinian entity speaks for Palestinians, they will feel at liberty to invent their own, in order to secure, rather than challenge, the gains of a century of Israeli settler-colonization.

Whether Palestinians reimagine their self-determination within a two-state paradigm in ways that secure liberty, justice, and security or seek those via a one-state pathway, history shows that "solutions" crafted by outsiders to avoid, suppress, and restrict Palestinian agency are bound to fail. As Palestinian analyst Tareq Baconi notes in a [recent *New York Times* op-ed](#), "A single state from the river to the sea might appear unrealistic or fantastical or a recipe for further bloodshed. But it is the only state that exists in the real world—not in the fantasies of policymakers." It's past time Western powers stopped inventing schemes to impose on the Palestinians, and instead accepted that the only way to a just peace begins with letting the Palestinians speak for themselves.