

# Give Separation a Chance

By Shaul Arieli

In Israel, the “peace camp” is a collective moniker for a variety of organizations and activists who all believe it is in Israel’s strategic interest to resolve the Israeli-Arab-Palestinian conflict, as this will improve security, the economy and social development, and ensure the country remains Jewish and democratic. The camp’s heyday was in the 1990s, under the umbrella idea of “two states for two peoples” – Israelis and Palestinians living side by side and cooperating on a broad range of issues. A tiny minority within the camp believed that forming a single state in all of Mandatory Palestine and welcoming refugees back to it was the best solution.

Some 25 years after the Oslo Accords, Israel and the Palestinians have failed to reach a permanent agreement – despite talks at Camp David in 2000, in Taba in 2001 and Annapolis in 2007 – this goal seems further away than ever. The current relationship between the two parties is based on the 1995 Interim Agreement. Due to shared interests, this agreement centered on security and economic coordination. By now, mutual distrust, the stalled negotiations, Europe’s weakness in the face of a growing right wing, civil wars in the Arab world and Trump’s leadership have combined to drive the Israeli “peace camp” into an ideological shift: from seeking a peace agreement with the Palestinians, to bilateral or unilateral separation from the Palestinians in the West Bank. This separation would center on security arrangements, as a temporary stopgap until a permanent agreement is reached, or as a new state of affairs that may last many years. At the same time, ideas such as a federation, a confederation or a single state in the entire area are gaining traction among Israelis.

## The Four Faces of the Israeli “Peace Camp”

Israel’s “peace camp” consists of dozens of organizations, nonprofits, foundations and centers that cannot all be mentioned here, although omission in no way indicates the merits of their work. **They can broadly be classified into four groups, based on their approach to the key issue – resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.** Within this rough division, various nuances are detailed further on. It is also worth bearing in mind that within every organization, members and activists hold varying opinions. In addition, some of these nonprofits focus on civil rights and the human rights of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories; while they maintain working ties with the leading organizations, they do not engage in political activity themselves. Others are ‘niche’ NGOs devoted to a single issue.

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*The first group* of organizations supports the formula of “two states for two peoples” and ending the occupation. It is spearheaded by the Geneva Initiative and Peace Now organizations. In 2003, the Geneva Initiative published a detailed outline for a permanent agreement formulated by unofficial Israeli and Palestinian actors; since then, both parties to the initiative have worked in unique collaboration to advocate for a permanent agreement on both sides. Peace Now has largely adopted the basic tenets of the initiative but focuses on ending the occupation, much like fellow members of this group. Currently notable among these are Breaking the Silence (veteran soldiers raising awareness about daily reality in the Occupied Territories and highlighting the moral price of military control over a civilian population), Yesh Din (working to defending human rights of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories), B’Tselem (also using legal means to defend the rights of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories), and Machsom Watch (women promoting freedom of movement for Palestinians). The organizations in this group support the two-state solution, largely according to the parameters that served as the basis for peace talks, which rely on international

resolutions – primarily 242 and 338 – and the 2000 Arab League peace initiative.

The power of these organizations lies in their independent research, conducted by like-minded academics or independent researchers and published on various platforms. They invest heavily both in social media and in field activities such as demonstrations, conferences, joint seminars, tours, lectures in Israel and abroad, press articles and interviews, and appearances on international stages.

**The second group** of organizations works to establish broad coalitions in the Israeli society that reach beyond the traditional “peace camp” of the 1990s and is headed by Women Wage Peace and “Darkenu” (Our Way). The former refrains from presenting an action plan or support a particular solution. This intentional ambiguity allows women with a wide range of identities to unite: right, center or left; religious and secular; Jewish, Arab, Druze and Bedouin; young and old; more and less privileged. Women Wage Peace are an especially active grassroots movement. They hold conferences, marches and assemblies, and also promote legislation to further a political solution. Darkenu, meanwhile, champions national unity and the “moderate majority”, calling for a government that will work towards a political solution to the conflict without specifying a plan. This movement, too, holds activities such as rallies and seminars.

**The third group** advocates for “separation now and peace later”. Its most notable proponent is the organization Commanders for Israel’s Security , who operate differently from their forebears, the Council for Peace and Security. This movement supports a two-state solution but does not believe it is feasible at present. Despite detailed plans concerning borders and security in the two-state scenario, these former top security officials believe the most pressing need is to curb current trends concerning settlement expansion and annexation of the West Bank, to strengthen the governance of the Palestinian Authority, and to create the necessary political conditions for renewing negotiations by engaging moderate Arab states and the US. Commanders for Israel’s Security is not a grassroots movement. It focuses primarily on social media, campaigns and rallies, and strictly refrains from cooperating with Palestinians.

**The fourth group** believes in “one homeland”. It is best represented by the organization “A Land For All”, which stresses the confederative aspects that must be taken into account in implementing the two-state solution based on the 1967 borders. This Jewish-Arab movement publicizes its ideas in conferences, meetings and websites, but has not presented a detailed plan for fulfilling its principles.

Within every group there are other, smaller nonprofits that also work abroad, primarily in the US. There are also research centers and think tanks that engage with various aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The largest of these is the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), which publishes an annual review on Israeli-Palestinian relations, periodically issues studies and position papers, and holds conferences on the subject. An enduring and especially interesting institution is the Economic Cooperation Foundation, which was behind the first steps taken towards the Oslo Accords, the Geneva Initiative, the Disengagement Plan, the Seam Zone, and others. The foundation has extensive and effective ties with the establishment in Israel, the US, Europe, Jordan, Egypt, with the Palestinians and others. The members of these various institutes mostly identify with the first or third groups of organizations.

The “peace camp” also has quite a few centers, such as the Peres Center for Peace, which run projects to develop Palestinian society and bring Israelis and Palestinians together. Another sub-group is nonprofits devoted solely to Jerusalem, such as Ir Amim and Terrestrial Jerusalem. These organizations focus on daily reality in the city in the context of the national conflict and tensions between communities. Their proposals for a permanent agreement relate to urban functioning and connecting between communities. Another notable player in the municipal context is the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies.

## **Pulling in Different Directions**

These four groups differ, first and foremost, in their belief whether the two-state solution is at all possible.

Three conditions must exist for this solution to come about:

1. Separation must be physically feasible, based on the usual parameters (1967 borders with agreed land swaps, a demilitarized Palestinian state and added security arrangements, a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem and a special regime in the holy places, resettling refugees in Palestine and compensation)
2. It must be politically feasible on both sides;
3. Both Israeli and Palestinian societies must be willing to accept it.

**The first group** believes that creating two states and ending the occupation is physically possible, as Israel can evacuate 30,000 families, mostly from isolated settlements, and reabsorb them. However, they see no political feasibility, as Netanyahu's government refuses to resume negotiations and has convinced Israelis that there is "no partner" for peace on the Palestinian side. They invest in preparing both societies for the idea that there is "a partner" on the other side. As a rule, this group objects to a single state or to a "harsh" federative or confederative outline, given economic, social, security and cultural disparities between Israeli and Palestinian societies and the repercussions of more than a century of violence.

**The second group**, which seeks to build a broad coalition in Israel to advance a solution to the conflict, refrains from taking a clear stance on the two-state solution.

**The third group**, which calls for separation first, also believes this is physically possible. However, the split between the PLO and Hamas reduces the political feasibility of effective negotiations. This group is gravely concerned with the public opinion aspect, given the shift to the right in Israel and decline of trust in the Palestinian side. Therefore, it centers on curbing rightwing trends and enlisting the Arab world and the US administration to further the process. This group invests considerable effort in warning Israelis of the consequences if these trends reach the point of legally annexing parts of the West Bank, as this will eventually turn Israel into a bi-national or Arab state.

**The fourth group** believes that separation is physically impossible based on these parameters, especially regarding the evacuation of settlers. Its objection to separation with or without an agreement is also a matter of principle: both nations are deeply connected to the whole of Mandatory Palestine and are entitled to free movement and habitation throughout the area.

## Borders and Walls

Another point of contention is the Separation Barrier and security concerns. The barrier, most of which had been built between 2002 and 2007, is 500 kilometers long and runs mostly along or near the Green Line. It remains incomplete in the following key areas: East Jerusalem-Ma'ale Adumim, Gush Etzion and the southeastern Hebron Hills. The two 'fingers' of Ariel and Qedumim are also incomplete. The 'seam zone' (the area between the barrier and the Green Line) currently comprises only 4% of the West Bank.

**Organizations in the first group** have a complicated view of the barrier. They do not rule out the need for its construction, given the terror attacks during the second intifada, but criticize the route initially approved and the fact that it was built unilaterally and not as part of an agreement with the Palestinians. They do, however, recognize the barrier's advantage in demarcating a possible border between Israel and a future Palestinian state as part of a permanent agreement. Another consideration for these organization's support of the separation wall is that the route of the barrier undermines Israelis' motivation to move to the West Bank; both secular and ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Israeli citizens do not wish to relocate to areas beyond the barrier.

**The security experts of the third group** are the most deeply engaged in the development of the barrier. In 2000-2002, members of the Council for Peace and Security were particularly vocal proponents of constructing the barrier, contrary to government and IDF opinion. More importantly, they played a key role in modifying the route to have it primarily address security concerns, and render it a possible alternative for a permanent border. Recently, the organization Commanders for Israel's Security (CIS) published its plan

for the interim period titled “*Security First*”. The plan calls on the government to immediately complete the barrier (without the “fingers” of Ariel and Qedumim) along a security-oriented route, in order to stop Palestinians from illegally entering Israel for work or to carry out attacks.

The second group is indifferent to this issue, while the fourth believes that a permanent agreement cannot include physical separation, as both peoples will eventually be allowed to reside and move freely throughout the area.

## **Gaza**

Another divisive issue is the future of the Gaza Strip and the evaluation of the political processes around it over the past 15 years, namely the evacuation of the settlements in 2005 and the forceful takeover by Hamas in 2007.

Another divisive issue within the Israeli Peace Camp is how to deal with the Gaza Strip

The first group sees Gaza as integral to the two-state solution and to the Palestinian state. However, fulfilling Israeli commitments (land swaps, a corridor between Gaza and the West Bank, establishing an airport at Dahaniyeh, constructing a seaport and opening the Rafah border crossing with Egypt) must be contingent on full, effective control of the Palestinian government in Gaza, especially regarding weapons and armed organizations.

The third group seeks a long-term arranged ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, along with significant economic measures to prevent a functional collapse in Gaza. In this context, it is worth noting Gisha – an organization that advocates freedom of movement for Palestinians in general, and in Gaza in particular.

## **From Peace to Separation**

Overall, the Israeli “peace camp” seems to be increasingly toeing the line with positions represented on the political level and edging to the right. We are witnessing a shift from support for the two-state solution – an idea based not only on mutual cooperation and recognition, but also on acknowledging that it can serve the essential national needs of both parties – to bilateral or unilateral separation based solely on Israel’s security interests.

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In their attempt to increase their engagement with Israeli society, some of these organizations are now adopting political parties’ communication strategies; to avoid confrontation with a right-leaning public or being labelled “left-wing traitors”, they are falling in line with the choice of political parties to no longer use terms such as “peace”, “coexistence” or “human rights”. Some are even presenting the public with action plans stemming from the right end of the political spectrum, but none have succeeded, as yet, in bringing this to fruition given the public’s short attention span, competition with the government’s control over the hegemonic media, and the lack of massive resources needed to do so. Some nonprofits are even avoiding funding from European countries that criticize Israel’s policy in the Occupied Territories, or from Israeli sources regularly maligned by the country’s right-wing government such as the New Israel Fund – despite the NIF’s profound contribution to Israeli society and its careful fundraising from individuals in Israel and abroad and not from foreign governments.

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In the long term, this conduct is weakening the impact of the “peace camp” on decision makers and on Israelis at large. Given the stalemate with the Palestinians, public opinion now portrays the conflict as irresolvable. This has dramatically reduced donations and many of these nonprofits have had to shut down. The Israeli “peace camp” is gradually spiraling out of existence. Like the peace process itself, this camp apparently needs a serious jolt to revive – yet may receive one from precisely the kind of political or security trauma it seeks to prevent.