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# Lama Abu-Odeh

## Replies

I am grateful to all the respondents for their comments and criticisms. Space constraints keep me from responding in detail to any of them. Instead I will briefly make three points that may help to clarify my aims and to turn back some objections that might prevent binationalism from getting a serious hearing.

### 1. Intimacy?

Many of the respondents think that my "proposal" would never work because the enmity between Palestinians and Israelis is simply too great. A binationalist state would coerce these two peoples into a level of engagement that would be intolerable, given their shared bloody history. For these respondents, the two-state solution is the only conceivable solution. It is necessary because Palestinians and Israelis can't stand to be "intimate" (Cobban); and it is ideal because it caters to the two peoples' desire to be separated and need to have an independent state (Lustick), recognizes Israel's right to self-determination and its Palestinian equivalent (Karsh), and respects history since it addresses each party's suspicion of the other (Fein).

These arguments exaggerate both the level of "separation" that would be achieved with a two-state solution, and the level of intimacy that would be required under binationalism.

The two most intimate forms of encounter and "cohabitation" between Palestinians and Israelis are, first, the Jewish "settlements" built in the West Bank and Gaza under various Likud and Labor governments (with no less deliberateness by one than by the other), and, second, the Palestinian daily labor migration into Israel, under conditions of heavy security surveillance and extreme economic exploitation. "Intimacy" with the Israelis was coerced on the Palestinians directly in the first case, and through economic despair in the second: in short, it results from occupation and exile.

It is hard to see how a two-state solution would eliminate this intimacy. In the case of settlements, I suppose, the seriousness of

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the "divorce" would depend on how many settlements the two-state advocate is willing to see dismantled. The positions fall along a wide political spectrum, and a two-state proposal coming from the Israeli right would be weakest in championing an end to intimacy.

As for labor migration: a two-state solution would hardly put an end to it. Short of a serious economic proposal that would exclude this phenomenon or reduce the forces that push for its existence—a proposal that would go far beyond an advocacy of independent sovereignty for both Palestine and Israel, and far beyond anything the respondents suggest (including the relatively progressive proposal of Segal)—an end of intimacy under a two-state solution would seem to me to be close to impossible.

So what would happen in a scenario of two states, some settlements here and there, and Palestinian labor migration into Israel as unprotected foreign workers? More hatred by Palestinians, and more by the Israelis. Intimacy upon painful intimacy.

Palestinians and Israelis harbor plenty of hatred for each other. That much is clear. But the point is to ask seriously the following question: what is the most productive solution for two peoples that hate each other and for whom an end of contact is impossible? (Not to mention that Palestinian citizens constitute close to 20 percent of the Israeli population.) The argument for binationalism is that it would force both parties to engage in each other's discourses: force the Israelis to rise up to their claim of being an island of liberal democracy in the middle of an authoritarian desert, and force the Palestinians to give up the fantasy of military triumph in a war waged across the borders.

## 2. Changing the Agenda

According to many of the respondents, no one wants a binational state: Palestinians hate it, so do Israelis (so argue Tamari, Lustick, Fein, Cobban, and Karsh). The underlying principle seems to be: don't advocate what won't match public opinion. If those concerned with it don't want it, surely it would never work.

But political agendas for struggle and advocacy are not based on polls. I am arguing that activist groups both within Israel and Palestine should work to transform public opinion—to convince Palestinians and Israelis that a binationalist state best serves their interests. I am making a proposal for new political advocacy, with the hope of progressive persuasion and recruitment, that might yield results in the long run. I am not offering a settlement to be negotiated now in Taba or Camp David, or a political deal to be

offered by the American envoy, nor simply long-term hopes (Moosa). Instead, I am proposing an agenda for struggle by political activists.

### 3. What About Israel?

Why didn't I argue that a binational state is also good for Israelis? (Cobban, Fein, Karsh, Lustick). I do indeed fail to offer such an argument. But I do think that binationalism would be in the interests of Israelis. It may indeed be in the material interests of Israelis to continue to enjoy the fruits of their historic injustice towards the Palestinians. But I also think that Israelis have the desire to feel morally justified in their acquisition. Hiding behind security justifications (Palestinians have historically behaved badly and against their own interest and that's why we were "forced" to have so much of their land and water to enjoy) has its moral limits. Not only for some Israelis, but also progressively for a world that has become more intelligent about the conflict.

Lustick's point about the structure of land ownership in Israel is closely related to this point. If indeed it becomes clear to the American public that land use in Israel is confined to Jews by laws and regulations (a fact that will be revealed in the course of time, and one that a movement for binationalism would spare no effort to expose), Israel would be understood as in violation of the most basic American ideas of equality (Seidman). Soon enough the fruits enjoyed by the Israelis would be understood less as a result of Palestinians acting "badly" and more as a result of Israelis acting deliberately and strategically to appropriate that which is not their own in order to create that which becomes forever their own. Binationalism would offer Israelis the opportunity to renounce some of those unjust benefits in exchange for a sense of moral justification, not to speak of the historical shame they would be spared.

Binationalism would also be in the security interests of the Jewish population in the region. Depending of course on how effectively it is put in place, binationalism would shift the level of the engagement of the communities from a basis of national conflict combined with economic exploitation into a context that would be potentially more stable and egalitarian because it would at least impose some formal constraint on the exercise of "raw power" (Seidman).

But what about demographic fears—that masses of Palestinians would flood the state of Israel and cause Israelis to become a disempowered minority in a newly binational state (Fein, Karsh)?

For better or worse, history shows that wealthier citizens exercise

overwhelming disproportionate influence in constitutional liberal states. Even if Jews were to be a numerical minority in a binationalist state, they would for a long time to come, given their current privilege in the region, continue to wield disproportionate power. More fundamentally, the constitutional settlement I am proposing would divide Jews and Palestinians in multiple new ways and would create a whole new set of interests. The point of a functioning binationalist state is that the overwhelmingly dominant line of polarization would not be Jews versus Palestinians. A legal structure with constitutional guarantees would produce a normal civil society with multiple lines of cleavage including class, gender, race, religion (and lack thereof), regional differences, and so on. If fully achieved, binationalism would displace the structure of nationalist conflict that produces so many of the demographic fears in the first place. ■

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Return to the forum on [binationalism](#), with Abu-Odeh and respondents.

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