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Political solutions among Palestinian university students: different models and conceptions

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ABSTRACT

Once a baseline resolution to the question of Palestine, the two-state solution has become contested after decades of failed negotiation and renewed support for a one-state solution. This study measures Palestinian university students' understandings of these different solutions through a representative survey. Results indicate that despite being unconvinced by it, the majority of respondents prefer a two-state solution, although their conception of its specificities differs to that of the Palestinian Authority. Most respondents held unclear ideas of the meaning of the one-state solution. Finally, a model based on analysis of this data explains the reasons and circumstances behind students' preferences.

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Introduction

The Middle East is in flux. There is scarcely a country that is not facing internal unrest in one way or another. This has taken forms ranging from defiance against autocratic leaders to the erosion of increasingly obsolete and unpopular colonial borders and full-out war (Barr 2011, 2). However you look at it, the region is facing a breakdown of the status quo.

Amidst this turmoil, one might be forgiven for thinking that the question of Palestine has moved off the centre stage. However, the responses to Donald Trump's recent moving of the US embassy to Jerusalem, as well as his open support for Israeli annexations, showed that the Palestinian cause can still mobilise Arab public opinion in its favour. We are not yet at a stage where an Arab leader can openly embrace relations with Israel without facing backlash from their people. This becomes especially relevant in light of the growing and coveted cooperation between the Arab Gulf states and Israel (Rabi and Mueller 2017, 590).

More importantly, and regardless of the perceived importance of Palestine to geopolitical machinations, Palestinians deserve to live in freedom and dignity. Indeed, few would argue against the necessity of bringing to a close one of the longest running struggles of our modern times, a struggle which has spawned numerous wars and one of the longest military occupations in modern history. But what would this resolution even look like?

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It has been over 25 years since the signing of the Oslo accords and the formal adoption of the two-state solution by both parties, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel (Khoury 2016, 465–482). Unfortunately, after all this time, it cannot be claimed that Palestinians and Israelis are closer to peace today than they were on the eve of signing the Interim Agreement in 1993. The peace process, as it has come to be called, has stalled despite multiple attempts to reinvigorate it.

Peace remains elusive, a Palestinian state has yet to materialise and living conditions continue to deteriorate (UNCTAD 2018). One does not need to be a historian to realise that the circumstances discussed in the original 1993 declaration have seen significant changes. The two-state solution, which was cemented internationally after Oslo as *the* solution, is facing growing scepticism among both Palestinians (PCPSR 2018a, 2018b) and Israelis (Israel Democracy Institute 2018).

On 7 July 2014, *Haaretz* reported on a survey carried out by the Dialog Institute regarding possible long-term solutions for peace. The survey found that approximately 60% of all Israelis support a negotiated two-state solution (Hasson 2014). Upon further inquiry, where the two-state solution was defined as 'The establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 boundaries with border modifications, most of the settlements to be annexed to Israel, Jerusalem to be divided and no return of refugees', support plummeted to a mere 35% (Hasson 2014).

Haaretz interpreted this discrepancy as the result of Israelis being unfamiliar with the specificities of the definition, so they opted to reject it (Hasson 2014). This is plausible, but it is also plausible that Israelis simply understand something different under the moniker of the two-state solution. This is reinforced by a survey that shows that most Jewish Israelis reject the idea of the division of Jerusalem (PCPSR 2018c). One could argue that the offered definition of the two-state solution simply contained elements they objected to.

Regardless of the reasons for this discrepancy, this raised the question of multiple understandings for various political solutions. This point is further reinforced by the same survey, which states that 33% of Israelis prefer a one-state solution, even if not explicitly named as such. However, even among those 33% there were disagreements on what form it would take. From those 33%, less than a third opted for a state which provided equal rights to all its citizens. The remaining majority opted for one state where the newly annexed Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip would not be given full equal rights – in other words, an Apartheid state. These results are in themselves quite interesting, but only paint one part of the picture (Hasson 2014). When we factor in Palestinian public opinion, then it is clear that each of these semantically loaded terms has multiple interpretations.

With dwindling support for two states, as well as rampant settlement expansion and the United States formally legitimising the Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem, it is easy to see why some argue that we should consider a paradigm shift away from the now familiar two-state-based resolution (Lustick 2013). Support for one state can be found among both Palestinians and Israelis – 24% (PCPSR 2018a, 2018b) and 21% (Djerejian et al. 2018) of the populations, respectively. This is a remarkably high number considering such a solution is often used as an example of a nightmare scenario to be avoided at all costs (Roi 2013, 72–75).

But as our earlier observations lead us to ask, do these terms hold the same meaning for Palestinians and Israelis? Do they even hold the same meaning within the same society? After decades of negotiation, much confusion has come to surround the two-state solution and its conceptions. The one-state solution is even less clear. Despite it being almost as old

as the two-state solution, it had virtually disappeared from public discourse until a relatively short while ago.

Semantic discord is no stranger to the question of Palestine; perhaps the most (in)famous example would be the interpretation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242. It is not my intention to relitigate this episode, but rather to illustrate that semantic disputes have very real and long-reaching consequences that can fundamentally influence policy and, indeed, have done so.

This study aims to investigate what different political solutions mean to Palestinian university students, as well as to measure which solution they prefer. This data will then be analysed in an attempt to construct a model to determine what factors influence the students' choices.

Why students?

Universities have traditionally played a significant role in Palestinian identity formation and the struggle for liberation. Under the control of the Israeli Civil Administration and prior to the formation of the Palestinian Authority (PA), popular committees and civil society played a crucial role in sustaining Palestinian national identity and life. Universities were often centres for political action (Bruhn 2006, 1125–1142; Zelikovitz 2014, 114–143).

The reasons for targeting Palestinian university students specifically are threefold:

- A) Students attending Palestinian universities today represent part of the 'post-Oslo generation', a young generation of Palestinians who came to maturity following the signing of the Oslo accords and have lived their entire lives under the administration of the PA. They are therefore accustomed to the 'official' Oslo approach, ie the two-state solution based on the pre-1967 borders. These students have lived their entire lives under the hegemony of this paradigm, which is widely perceived as a failure (PCPSR 2018a, 2018b). This could push students towards alternative concepts for political resolution.
- B) This generation of Palestinian university students is further distinguished in that they came to maturity during a period of lock-down and closure of the Palestinian areas from Israel (OCHA Occupied Palestinian Territory 2012). Contrary to their parents, who had an easier time accessing Israel, the vast majority of this generation have not interacted with Jewish Israelis other than through the occupation. Separation colours attitudes towards the other (Christ et al. 2014, 3996–4000), which in turn could be reflected in proposed solutions.
- C) Palestinian society is a young society with a very high number of students who choose to continue their journey into higher education institutions. Furthermore, education is critical to the process of elite formation (Hanafi and Arvanitis 2015, 136–138). By researching the students of today – and the leaders of tomorrow – we are also forming a preliminary understanding of where Palestinian opinion could move to in the future.

However, before we can begin talking about the concrete specificities of this study and its design, we must first look at how we seek to conceptualise different understandings of both the two-state and one-state solutions. A clear conceptualisation of these possible understandings will be crucial in determining the position of the students and in understanding their choice of which to support.

The two-state solution

Today, the two-state solution refers to the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state next to Israel (Saleh 2005, 291). A significant breakthrough in this process materialised in the – at the time – secret Oslo Accords. Although these accords were of critical importance to the peace process, they were mostly a declaration of principles which did not contain any concrete parameters for a Palestinian state. As a matter of fact, the word 'state' with regards to Palestinians was never mentioned once (UNHCR 1993).

It was two years later, in what was referred to as Oslo II, that negotiations earnestly began. More solid parameters were discussed and the PA was established as a transitional body to pave the way for the final settlement and establishing a state. Officially, it was to last no more than 5 years (UNHCR 1995).

In the broadest terms, then, the two-state solution calls for establishing two states, as the name implies. On the ground, however, to determine how this is physically achieved, a consensus regarding so-called 'final status issues' must be reached (Goldenberg 2015). These core issues are (a) the *borders* of the proposed Palestinian state; (b) the final *security* arrangements, cooperation and withdrawal of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF); (c) the fate of the illegal Israeli *settlements* in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the possibility of land swaps; (d) a solution to the Palestinian *refugee* crisis created by Israeli expulsions during and after its initial formation; and (e) the fate of *Jerusalem*, its division and sovereignty over it.

Therefore, beyond the basic premise, a conception of the two-state solution can be broadly summed up as a combination of proposed resolutions for these five final status issues. This would also explain how one could theoretically be a supporter of the two-state solution, but at the same time reject one or more methods of resolution for these core issues.

The one-state solution

Contrary to popular belief, the one-state solution is not a new idea that arose out of the crises facing the two-state solution. It was, in fact, one of the earliest suggestions for a peaceful resolution, advocated by various Palestinian and Jewish groups (Wieseltier 2003) and even by the British (McDowall 1990, 25).

Disillusion with the two-state solution has pushed many to consider alternative models for a resolution, including one-state frameworks. However, today and even amongst supporters, there is no clear consensus on what such a state might look like. But an increasing number of scholars are arguing that the answer to the question of Palestine lies beyond partitioning (Bashir, 2014; Tilley 2010, 12–16).

I propose that there are four broad models for a one-state solution that could apply to our context:

- 1 **A binational state:** The binational state conceptualisation regards Palestinians and Jewish Israelis as separate peoples. For our purposes, the definition offered by Smoocha will act as our point of reference. Here, we are speaking of 'full binationalism', sometimes known as 'thick binationalism'. Smoocha identifies it as follows:

Thick binationalism is full binationalism, as in Belgium, in which the populations are conceived of as peoples, rather than as a majority and a minority, equal in standing, sharing

power, resources and appointments, enjoying self-administration, and holding a veto power on any critical resolution. (Smootha 2009, 511)

The main allure of this model is that it takes into account both individual and national rights for Palestinians and Israelis, and preserves as well as protects the right to self-determination for both peoples through institutional and constitutional measures.

One of the drawbacks to this model is that it risks cementing national and ethnic rivalries in competing territories within one state.

2 A uni-national state: In such a state, Palestinians and Israelis are not considered distinct peoples. This could be viewed as egalitarian civic nationalism, rather than ethnicity-based nationalism. It would not bestow any special rights or positions based on ethnicity or people-hood. Perhaps the most well-known example of this form of conflict resolution is the formation of the new regime in post-Apartheid South Africa (Smootha 2009, 509–522).

Nonetheless, it could be argued that such a form is an ideal type and does not necessarily apply in its pure form in South Africa, or indeed in the hypothetical Palestinian–Israeli state. This model is especially popular among pro-Palestinian advocates for the one-state solution, such as Said, Tilley and Abunimah. The risk of such a model is that it could easily devolve into a situation where one demographic majority could dominate the political sphere. It also does not sufficiently account for the potency of both Palestinian and Israeli nationalism, and the desired form of self-determination for each people (Bashir 2016, 563–566).

3 Israeli annexation of the Palestinian Territories while granting rights to the newly annexed population: In this case, Palestinians are not seen as constituting a people, but as individuals or communities – never a nation. It should be noted here that when we speak of granting rights to the Palestinian population we are not speaking of complete equality with Jewish Israelis, but rather equality with Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Israel's policy in the West Bank since its occupation in 1967 has had major political and ideological components (Tilley 2010, 19–49). Surveys show that most Jewish Israelis do not even see the West Bank as occupied territory (Israel Democracy Institute 2016). All these factors make this option very attractive to Israelis.

In the broadest terms, this plan entails the complete annexation and incorporation of the West Bank into the Israeli state, dismantling the PA and extending Israeli law throughout the whole territory (Glick 2014, 118–121).

In general, this plan does not include the Gaza Strip, as it is argued that Israelis have already 'given up' Gaza and that it de facto constitutes an independent entity (Glick 2014, 118–135). This would also contribute greatly to alleviating some of the demographic fears resulting from this plan.

4 Israeli annexation of the Palestinian Territories without granting rights to the newly annexed population: This solution is similar to the one mentioned above; however, the crucial difference here is that the newly annexed population would not be granted equal rights. Although this does not seem like a solution at all, but rather a different expression of the status quo, it is nonetheless supported by many Israelis, as illustrated by the previously mentioned Haaretz poll (Levi 2012).

It should be noted that support for these annexation models is hardly a fringe phenomenon. There is a considerable portion of Israelis, particularly among the right wing, who call for annexation in one form or another, and this reaches the highest echelons of Israeli society – most notably, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin and Defense Minister Naftali Bennett (Kuttab 2015). Indeed, these positions have become mainstream among Israelis, and both Netanyahu and Gantz have pledged to annex increasing territories of the West Bank, especially area C, which comprise large swaths of land but are relatively sparsely populated. The annexation of the Jordan Valley, for example, has featured prominently in both of their election campaigns (Magid 2020).

Before moving on to the next section, it is worth mentioning that these are broad models which can translate into a multitude of institutional configurations, and support variations within and between them. For instance, in the case of a binational state, it could take multiple forms, such as a confederation, a federation or even a canton system. In the case of annexation there are a breadth of schemes with varying numbers of annexed areas, stipulations and degrees of autonomy for Palestinians.

A third option?

Throughout the years, many have come up with models that attempted to escape the binary choice of a one- or two-state paradigm. These models revolved around shared sovereignty and deterritorialisation, where residency and citizenship rights are separated. Under such configurations, Palestinians and Israelis would be free to live in the entire territory between the river and the sea, but would remain citizens of their respective governments. There are many proposed forms this option could take, with varying degrees of rights and shared responsibilities (Bashir 2016, 570–573). However, many of them take as a starting point the same parameters as the two-state solution, such as the pre-1967 borders for the Palestinian state. They also generally tend to ignore questions of resource allocation and power asymmetries. Some formulations of this model are tantamount to aesthetic reconfigurations of the current status quo, more interested in alleviating Israeli demographic fears than preserving Palestinian rights.

Due to their extreme variance, there is no unified or widely supported version of any of these proposals, which is why they were not incorporated in the survey.

With the conceptualisations of our solutions established, we can begin to gauge the positions of the students. This was accomplished by conducting a representative survey of Palestinian university students in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. To measure their understanding of the two-state solution, they were given the choice of selecting resolutions to the five final status issues which would best approximate the PA's position. When it came to the one-state solution, they were offered a selection of the four models mentioned above.

The full survey form can be found in the appendix.

Methodology

The target group for this survey was Palestinian university students studying at universities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Although Palestinian refugees abroad as well as Palestinians living within Israel are crucial segments of the Palestinian people, they were not the target of this survey. I have chosen to limit my survey to those who can vote in

Palestinian elections, and whose opinion can thus – theoretically – influence PA policy through electoral methods.

As for the sample size, at the time of the study, there were approximately 192,679 students at Palestinian universities according to the ministry of education (Salahat 2015). This means the sample size needed to be approximately 600 to maintain a 95% confidence interval with a 4% margin of error (Kotrlík, 2001, 43). The survey was carried out from 28 April to 5 May 2016 by a team of 10 researchers.

Due to the unfeasibility of totally random selection for almost 200,000 students, students were selected at random based on the average number of those entering their respective university per hour and the development of a skip interval. Due to this limitation, the number of students approached was increased to 700 to maintain our confidence interval and margin of error. The questionnaires were administered on a face-to-face basis, with the researcher asking the questions and filling out the answers. This meant that the researcher was always present and able to answer any questions students may have had.

For the West Bank, three major universities representing different geographical regions were chosen: The Najah University in the north, Birzeit University in the centre, and Hebron University in the south. In addition to these, a fourth university, Al-Quds Open University, was surveyed. This university was added because it represents the largest slice of the student population across multiple cities.

In the Gaza Strip, the situation is different. Due to the small size of the area there are no significantly different geographic regions to speak of. The difference here is that some universities are considered sympathetic to different political movements. Data was collected from the Islamic University which is considered sympathetic to Hamas, and the Azhar University which is considered sympathetic to Fateh. In addition, data was also gathered from the Gazan branch of the Al-Quds Open University, for the sake of consistency.

Our sample was selected from these seven universities. The West Bank hosts 122,563 university students, while the Gaza Strip hosts 70,086 (Salahat 2015). Therefore, our distribution was 445 students in West Bank universities, and 255 students in Gazan universities. However, a distribution based solely around proportionality would produce an extremely lopsided sample. For example, some universities, such as Hebron, would only receive 43 questionnaires, while the Quds Open University would receive 239.

This issue mainly affects the West Bank, as the numbers of students in the Gaza Strip are closer to each other and the overall number is lower. To combat this issue, a baseline of roughly 100 questionnaires per university was established, and weighting was introduced to compensate for this new baseline. Weighting for Birzeit, Hebron and Al-Quds Open University in the West Bank was set to 0.55, 0.43 and 1.76, respectively. Al Najah University was close enough to the baseline that weighting was unnecessary. Naturally, these weights were only applied to non-demographic questions.

Findings

There is a significant gap between what the two-state solution the PA is negotiating for looks like, and what students think it looks like. The PA's position on land swaps, settlements and security is the opposite of what the majority of students believe it is. As shown in [Figure 1](#), the students' conception of the two-state solution being negotiated by the PA is one where no land swaps occur and settlements are dismantled, and where the Palestinian state

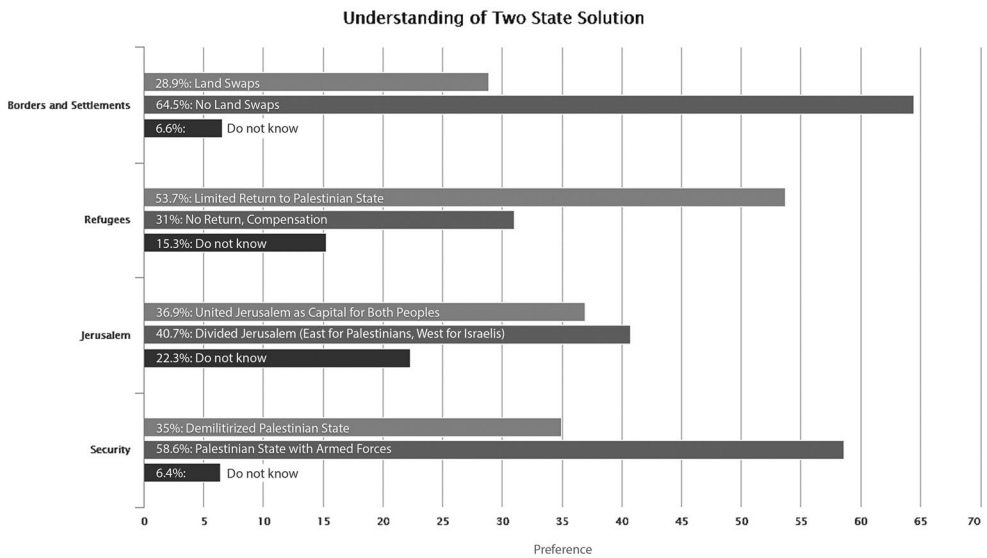


Figure 1. Understanding of two-state solution being negotiated for by the Palestinian Authority.

is allowed to have armed forces. The only area where there is any ambiguity regarding the position of the students is on the question of Jerusalem, although the answers are very close to each other. There is also a sizable proportion of students (22.3%) who simply did not know the PA's position on the question of Jerusalem. When it comes to refugees, since there is no recognisable coherent position of the PA, it is difficult to say whether students agreed with the PA's vision or not; however, students' understanding of this position is one where refugees are allowed a limited return to the newly created Palestinian state.

I want to argue, therefore, that there is a lack of inclusiveness in the negotiating process. Palestinians seem to be left in the dark, which hampers any efforts for the democratisation of the negotiating process. This does not come as a surprise, as Palestinian society as of late has been facing increased authoritarianism and censorship from the PA (Hawari 2019). This was demonstrated by the shocked reaction of the Palestinian public to the leaking of 1600 internal negotiation documents by Al-Jazeera. This leak has come to be known as the 'Palestine Papers' (Milne and Black 2011). The majority of the public had no idea what the PA was negotiating for, how it negotiated and to what degree, and on what it was compromising. For example, it became abundantly clear that the PA negotiating team had all but given up on the right of return of Palestinian refugees (Al-Arian 2011), as well as conceding large swaths of land in East Jerusalem (Carlstrom 2011), among other concessions they would not dare declare to the public.

On the other hand, when presented with the different models for one state, students understood the one-state solution as shown in Table 1.

When it comes to the one-state solution, we can see that students' opinions were fragmented, with no one understanding being supported by a significant majority. However, the general conception of one state tends to be democratic.

The data reveals that the two-state solution remains the solution of choice championed by almost 67% of students; however, it should be noted that an equal proportion of the students do not believe such a solution can bring an end to the question of Palestine. This

Table 1. Students' understanding of the one-state solution.

Solution	Percentage of students
Uni-national state	24.7
Binational state	29.1
Annexation with rights	15.6
Annexation without rights	15.7
I don't know	14.9

is understandable, as this resolution automatically means a compromise on the rights of Palestinian refugees whose return Israel blocks, not to mention the difficulty of partitioning such a small territory with such intertwined populations (Abunimah 2006, 51–54). It also does not generally address the Nakba and other root causes, as the whole solution is based around the occupation of 1967, which itself is a symptom. Despite most students remaining unconvinced by this solution, many have come to view it as the best they could hope for given the current circumstances, or perhaps as a stepping stone towards an outcome more to their liking. It could also be argued that their position is the result of over 20 years of cultural and political hegemony by the PA, which surely predisposes students to think a certain way.

When it came to understandings of the one-state solution, the students had less of a clear consensus. Although the majority had a democratic conception, it was surprising that most support fell under the binational state model, and not the uni-national state model which is often the preferred model of a one-state solution among pro-Palestinian advocates. Furthermore, the relatively high number of students who simply did not know what the one-state solution meant, and the fragmentation of the remainder, lends credence to the idea that the one-state solution is underdiscussed and largely absent from mainstream Palestinian politics.

We have uncovered what students think various solutions mean, as well as their preferences regarding them; however, we are left with a bigger puzzle to solve: What different factors drive students towards these conclusions and preferences?

The geographical divide

Even before the current Israeli siege, which officially began in 2007, transportation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank was difficult, and almost impossible for the average Palestinian (OCHA Occupied Palestinian Territory 2016). The isolation of the Gaza Strip is worsened by the political divide between Fateh and Hamas, culminating in military action by Hamas in 2007, which took over the Strip and replaced the PA as the ruling body (Salah 2017, 561–576). Not only are the different territories ruled by different parties with differing ideologies, each has its own political and economical context and hardships affecting its political outlooks. When the question of political solutions was put forward, large discrepancies between the two regions were observed: The vast majority (83.1%) of those in Gaza supported the two-state solution, as opposed to 57.5% in the West Bank. Meanwhile, only 16.9% of those in the Gaza Strip supported a one-state solution, while it had the support of 42.5% of those in the West Bank.

The Gaza Strip and the West Bank, although both militarily occupied (Sanger 2010, 397–446), have very different relationships with Israel. While the vast majority of students' experience with Israel comes directly through the occupation, this occupation experience

Table 2. Has your family ever been subjected to any of the following at the hands of the Israeli authorities? (% , by region.)

	Arrested	Beaten	Insulted	Killed	Home demolished	Banished	Lands annexed	Injured	None
West Bank	35.7	2.9	2.0	6.1	1.1	1.1	5.0	6.3	39.7
Gaza Strip	5.5	3.1	2.0	18.0	20.4	2.4	3.1	8.6	36.9
Total	24.6	3.0	2.0	10.5	8.2	1.6	4.3	7.2	38.7

Pearson Chi-square value = 0.00; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

differs according to context. This becomes clear when comparing across regions (see Table 2).

Whereas the experiences in the West Bank tend to revolve more around the daily manifestation of a physically present military occupation force, the case is different in the Gaza Strip as their occupation is maintained at long range through siege as well as aerial and artillery bombardment. Therefore, Gaza tends to experience Israel through its wars and siege on the Strip, rather than through a present force on the ground operating inside the Strip itself. The large difference in the numbers of arrests, kills and home demolitions confirms this. These variations undoubtedly contribute to each region's outlook.

Based on these answers, we can safely say that the exposure to political violence (EPV) in the West Bank differs from that in the Gaza Strip. Although both face great difficulties, and it is not the intention of this article to diminish anyone's suffering, the EPV in the Gaza Strip is of a more fatal nature than that in the West Bank. Death and the destruction of homes will have a different effect on those surrounding them than arrests. This is not to say that there are no deaths or demolitions in the West Bank, but the contrast between the regions is significant.

Could this help explain why students in the Gaza Strip are less likely to support the one-state solution?

Canetti et al. have carried out multiple studies on the long-term effect of EPV. They found that 'traumatic events influence perceptions of existential security' (Canetti and Lindner 2015, 11–12), which directly affects political attitudes. A different study found that those living in areas of higher risk tend to be less compromising: 'findings provide powerful evidence that EPV reduces individuals' willingness to compromise. Our analyses reveal that under prolonged EPV, elevated levels of distress influence perceptions of threat, which in turn are associated with more intransigent and militant attitudes' (Hirsch-Hoefler et al. 2016, 845–859).

Given that Gaza has witnessed multiple incredibly destructive wars in the last decade, it is clear to see why Gazans possess a high level of perceived existential insecurity. After many wars, it is logical to view separation from Israelis as the path to security and safety. I therefore argue that one of the contributing factors to Gazans' strong rejection of the one-state solution is their higher exposure to considerable political violence of a more fatal nature relative to those in the West Bank.

Although this is the major way in which Palestinian students interact with Israel, it is not the only way. We have covered the myriad of negative encounters students have had with the Israeli occupation; however, it would be an almost impossible task to separate the two populations fully outside the context of occupation. This study found that 20% of all Palestinian students have had contact with Israelis, whether through political and solidarity activities or even work

relations. As to be expected at this point, there is a significant divergence in these numbers depending on region; whereas over 25% of Palestinians in the West Bank answered in the affirmative to having relationships with Israelis outside of the context of occupation, only 10% from the Gaza Strip did.

Due to the political as well as the geographical context, students in the West Bank were more exposed to contact with Israelis outside the context of occupation. Contact theory hypothesises that contact between different groups under *optimal conditions* could lead to a reduction in intergroup animosity. The effects are not exclusive to those directly taking place in these interactions; there is a wider indirect effect influencing those not taking part as well (Christ et al. 2014, 3996–4000). It is, however, important not to lose sight of the power relations and the nature of occupation and settler colonialism that are characteristic of the question of Palestine. The 'optimal conditions' spoken of originally by Allport do not apply in this context. We cannot pretend that we are examining mere prejudice between two normal neighbouring communities in a vacuum, while overlooking Israel's settler colonial nature. Nevertheless, it is argued that in the vast majority of cases, these optimal conditions are not essential to the process of animosity reduction (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).

When we analyse the data based on the students' previous involvement with Israelis, the results show a statistically significant trend suggesting if one has had contact with Israelis outside the context of occupation, it is more likely one will support the one-state solution – 38% vs. 29% for those who have not had such contact.

This at the very least signals preparedness to live with Israelis in one mixed society. Since this is positively correlated with contact with Israelis, which is much more difficult and less prevalent in the case of the Gaza Strip, I argue that it could be a secondary contributing factor to the contrast in position between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

It should be noted that there are no statistically significant differences in the understanding of the one- and two-state solutions among those who have and have not dealt with Israelis. A further point worth mentioning is that the older a student is, the more likely it is that that student has had contact with Israelis, through the occupation or otherwise.

The political divide

Over the last decade, the Palestinian political landscape has been shaped by the struggle between Fateh and Hamas. This struggle has exacerbated already existing cleavages, and accelerated the polarisation of Palestinian society.

Although there exist other political parties within Palestine, one cannot ignore that most of Palestinian society is represented mainly by Fateh and Hamas. This is also reflected in the sympathies of the students, where Fateh garnered the support of 34.4% of the students, while Hamas garnered 19.1%. Even the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the largest leftist political party in Palestine, garnered the sympathies of only 4.2% of the student population. As a matter of fact, when it comes to political sympathies, the 'groups' gaining the most 'followers' among students are those who support none of the available Palestinian parties, at 34%. This can be seen as disillusion with the lack of progress of any movement in their stated goals, and the high levels of frustration with the current status of division between Fateh and Hamas.

Despite the suggested political 'tri-polarity', when push comes to shove those who identify with none are often forced to partake in strategic voting, and choose a side between

Fateh and Hamas. The 2018 student elections at Birzeit University (2018) are illustrative of this point, as out of 8404 students who cast their votes, 7399 votes were almost evenly split between Fateh and Hamas (2018 نتائج انتخابات...). One further aspect that should be highlighted is the context of Palestinian society, which makes it generally risky to go on record about one's political stance. For example, Palestinians have been arrested over social media posts (Wilson 2016). Therefore there are good reasons to suspect the influence of preference falsification in these results.

When inspecting the answers given by students on which solution they prefer based on their political sympathies, the following was witnessed (see Table 3).

The numbers reveal that outside of Hamas, the preferences are fairly close to each other. Judging by the official position of the Fateh movement and its support of the PA, one might assume that they would be the most supportive of the two-state solution, as the legitimacy of their leadership rests upon this premise. However, this does not seem to be the case – at least among the students – as they show levels of support for two states similar to those disillusioned with all Palestinian parties. This could signal that there is a brewing discontent between the base and the leadership, or perhaps other factors influence this.

What might be more interesting to many, though, is that students sympathetic to Hamas remain the group with the largest support for the two-state solution. This should not be too surprising to those following the development of Hamas as a political movement, and its adaptation according to period and political context. Early signs of this shift can be seen through Hamas' participation in the 2004 municipal elections (Nemer 2017). Despite its fiery rhetoric and perceived rejection of all things Oslo, Hamas adopted the 2006 prisoners' document as its official position (Totah 2016). This was a shared document drafted by Palestinian prisoners of all factions in Israeli jails in an attempt to reconcile Fateh and Hamas and formulate a unified position. The very first goal of the prisoners' paper is the following:

The Palestinian people in the homeland and in the Diaspora seek and struggle to liberate their land and remove the settlements and evacuate the settlers and remove the apartheid and annexation and separation wall and to achieve their right to freedom, return and independence and to exercise their right to self-determination, including the right to establish their independent state with al-Quds al-Shareef as its capital on *all territories occupied in 1967*. (Middle East Web 2006, emphasis my own)

This was hardly the first time Hamas has agreed to a state based on the 1967 borders, and it would not be the last. Its transformation from a spoiler to a player often goes unappreciated, perhaps intentionally so. This, however, still does not explain why Hamas are more supportive of it than Fateh members, whose whole governmental legitimacy depends upon such a solution coming to fruition.

No political party is a monolith. There exist multiple currents within both Fateh and Hamas that possess differing views on how to solve various issues. The difference here is that Hamas

Table 3. Which solution do you prefer? (% by political sympathies.)

	Prefers two states	Prefers one state
Fateh	62.7	37.3
Hamas	77.6	22.4
None	62.4	37.6
Total	67.5	32.4

Pearson Chi-square value = 0.008; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Due to low number of respondents from other parties, they were not included in this table.

shows a discipline and unity among its rank-and-file members that is generally not present in Fateh, where orders from the leadership are carried out regardless of personal misgivings (Esposito and Shahin 2013, 512–513).

Fateh, on the other hand, is relatively less centralised on this front. Symptoms of this were seen during the 2006 parliamentary elections, where multiple Fateh members disobeyed the leadership and ran as independents, splitting the votes. In addition to this, the votes were further dispersed with the decision of younger Fateh leaders to challenge the 'old guard' by forming their own electoral list (Urquhart 2005). There is little reason to believe that Fateh as a party has been able to overcome this issue, especially with the setbacks to their political programme and the low approval rate of Mahmoud Abbas (PCPSR 2018a, 2018b).

The class divide

The question of economy and its effects on peace and stability has been a long-running one (Ye 2001). With the demise of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a unipolar world, the United States was able to impose its vision and stipulations for peacebuilding on the Palestinians. This imposed neoliberal model for state and peacebuilding depended on economic liberalisation and the leadership of the private sector (Haddad 2016, 15–35). For example, it was put forward that regional cooperation in the 'low politics' arena would have a spill-over effect that would eventually seep into 'high politics'. Business elites could act as back channels to help facilitate peace, as peace is perceived as good for business (Selby 2008, 11–29). All of this would result in 'peace dividends' which would act as self-sustaining incentives to avoid conflict and benefit those involved. This model of peacebuilding has faced numerous challenges within the Palestinian context – the allegedly aimed-for cooperation as a path to peace remains a fantasy, and what was achieved instead was a stunted economy held hostage by an Israeli matrix of control. What these agreements helped achieve was, rather, a structured subordination of the Palestinian economy to the Israeli one (Diwan 1999, 35–39).

As evidenced by the current status quo, it would seem that this approach has failed to produce the results it claims to seek. It would be helpful to see whether and how different economic factors could influence students' views. If we are to appraise whether economic factors play a significant role in the political outlook among our students, we must first inspect what priority they ascribe to the economy.

When ranking their national priorities, results show that students quite clearly ascribe the least importance to the economy. This could hint at multiple things: It could mean that the students' main grievances are political in nature and not economic. However, it could also be attributed to the fact that these are still students, most of whom have not taken part in the labour market yet. Perhaps the majority of these students have not experienced the burden of providing for their families in a stagnant economy, and thus relegate such matters to secondary importance. If we are to compare this to the general Palestinian population at the time, 38% of all Palestinians placed poverty and unemployment as the most important issue in need of addressing by the PA (PCPSR 2016). However, these numbers have since dropped to 26% (PCPSR 2018a, 2018b).

When it comes to income, we can see from [Figure 2](#) that almost 70% of our students fall beneath the 4000 NIS mark.

Our next step was to find out whether there was any relationship between this income level and their level of support for one or two states (see [Table 4](#)).

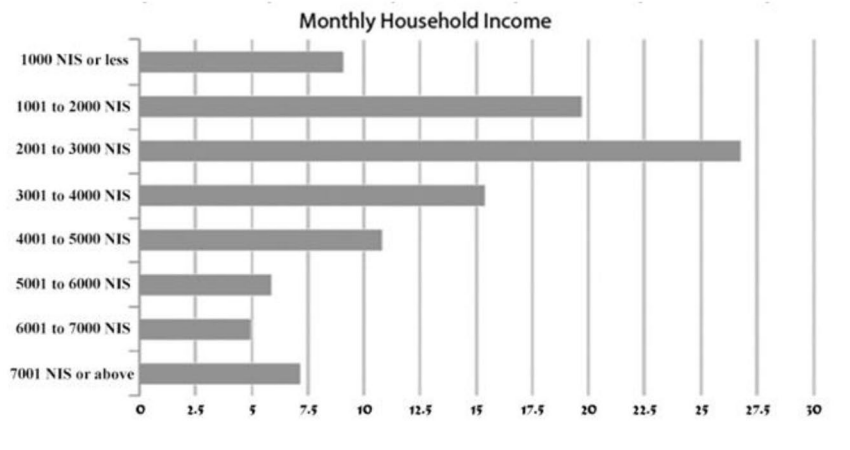


Figure 2. Monthly household income (Israeli new shekels).

Table 4. Which solution do you prefer? (% , by income bracket.)

	Prefers two states	Prefers one state
1000 NIS or less	65.6	34.4
1001 to 2000 NIS	67.4	32.6
2001 to 3000 NIS	77.0	23.0
3001 to 4000 NIS	76.6	23.4
4001 to 5000 NIS	50.7	49.3
5001 to 6000 NIS	52.4	47.6
6001 to 7000 NIS	54.3	45.7
7001 NIS or higher	52.9	47.1
Total	66.8	33.2

Pearson Chi-square value = 0.00; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

It becomes obvious that there is a gap between those with a family income of less than 4000 NIS per month and those with more than 4001 NIS. While we cannot speak of a direct correlation between level of income and support for one state, it is clear that after a certain threshold, support for one state is significantly higher. Similarly, the belief that the two-state solution would solve the question of Palestine was most prevalent among the lowest income brackets, whereas the top brackets had the least belief in it doing so.

These findings are rather remarkable, as they show a reversal of the situation before the outbreak of the second Intifada. According to a study carried out by Mi'ari in 1999, low-income, working-class Palestinians were the ones most likely to support cooperation and cultural normalisation with Israelis. This was attributed to workers and their families depending more on working inside Israel as their source of livelihood, encouraging more openness towards it. Furthermore, this also meant having more contact with Israelis due to the nature of their work (Mi'ari, 1999).

This 1999 study is significant for us, as it emphasises the effects of the severance of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip from Israel. Today, the more affluent classes are the ones with this contact: If you are a part of the higher income brackets, our results

show that you are more likely to have contact with Israelis outside the context of occupation. Today, the Palestinian business/merchant class depends upon Israel in one way or another. It is impossible for a business to import anything without Israeli approval. These goods would then need to come through Israeli border points and thus require cooperation with Israelis in one way or another, whether for purchase of raw materials, fuel, or other necessities. This is not to imply that such trade did not exist in the past; however, it was dwarfed by the sheer number of those seeking work in Israel.

This can be witnessed especially in the highest income bracket, where 46% of students have had contact with Israelis. An additional factor is that students from East Jerusalem had a large share in the highest income brackets, and due to its political context, Palestinians living there receive far higher wages than those living in other areas of the West Bank (Abu Ghazaleh 2008, 70–71). Naturally those living in East Jerusalem must also interact with all manner of Israelis.

A further contributing factor is that the vast majority of the students from the Gaza Strip tended to be concentrated in the lowest income brackets, with minimal presence in the highest ones. In this case, it could be argued that income can serve as a marker that correlates with other contributing factors.

Putting the pieces together

Based on the above factors and relationships, it was found that the geographical location of the students played a significant role in determining which solution they preferred, as it correlated with many factors: their political affiliation, the nature of their grievances, their level of contact with Israelis and their level of income. There were other factors at play, such as their age and the nature of their class and employment, which influenced the students' decision. Based on the collected puzzle pieces, the following model was developed (see Figure 3).

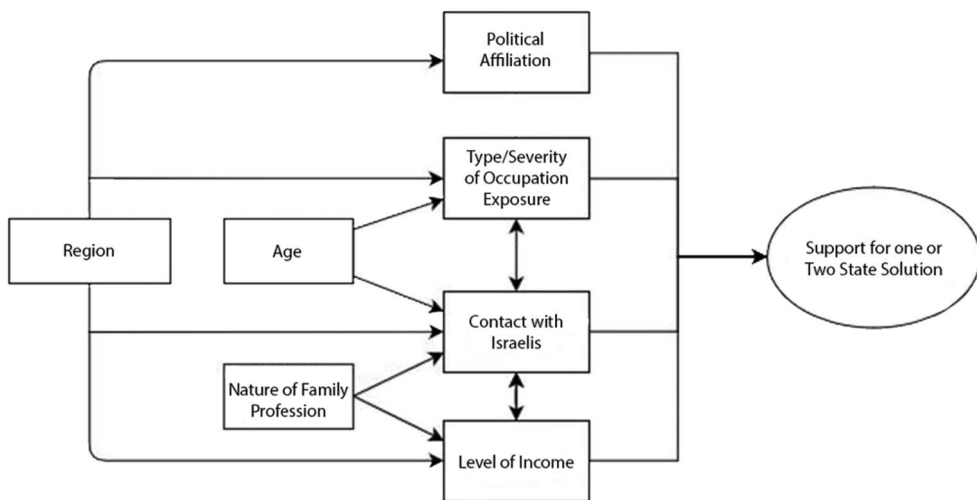


Figure 3. Suggested web model to determine support for one or two states among Palestinian university students.

Conclusion

With over a century of history, the question of Palestine has taken on a life of its own. Certain positions become a central part of newly created national mythologies which do not withstand scrutiny once concretely defined and explored. Even within a specific subset of one society, there exists a breadth of understandings regarding the different political solutions and their meanings. One's acceptable compromise becomes another's red line.

Although there was no single, clear-cut conception, the general understanding shared by the students of the two-state solution was the establishment of two states along the pre-May 1967 armistice lines. This would be achieved without land swaps and with a limited return of refugees to the newly created Palestinian state, and its capital would be East Jerusalem alone. This Palestinian state would also maintain its own armed forces. Contrary to the dominant narrative, students sympathetic to Hamas were the ones who most supported the two-state solution, while students sympathetic to Fateh were much more sceptical. On the other hand, when discussing different formulations of a one-state solution, consensus was less clear. Although most students had a democratic conception of a one-state solution, it was surprising that the binational state took the lead as the most common understanding. While it is true that this lead over the uni-national state is not massive, it is still a significant departure from the plurality of Palestinian one-state advocates. It is plausible that the different kind of exposure to political violence in the West Bank produced a reaction more tailored to its own context, where students disillusioned with the two-state solution were driven to choose a binational model to maintain some level of perceived autonomy, independence or form of self-determination that would secure them from Israeli domination. The reality remains, however, that the students' answers were relatively spread out among all the one-state models. I believe that this is a side effect of the lack of mainstream discussion on the matter, and the absence of any form of guidance from political elites or parties. Scholars advocating for a uni-national state, especially in the diaspora, should take heed of these results when they attempt to engage young Palestinians, lest this advocacy devolve into speaking over the students, and suffer from a lack of popular input similar to the official Oslo-spawned process. A further angle to consider is that these models are by no means ultimate; it is not farfetched to imagine a Palestinian-led struggle towards a bi- or uni-national state triggered by the annexation of the West Bank. As with most of the history of the question of Palestine, political transformations – discursive or otherwise – have often resulted from reactions to changes on the ground, rather than emanating from a negotiated understanding. If a paradigmatic shift towards one model or the other were to occur among Palestinians, I believe it would be no different in this regard. Even today, a quarter to a third of the Palestinian population shows a preference for a one-state solution without any public discourse on the matter, which demonstrates how the two-state solution paradigm has become untenable for many (PCPSR 2019).

It is worth situating these numbers within their proper historical context. In mid 1988, support for the two-state solution among Palestinians was barely 17% (Satloff 1988). At the end of the same year, the PLO adopted it as their basis for resolution (Lohr 1988) and its support rate rose greatly, reaching a record high of 81% support for the peace process in 1996 (Center for Palestine Research and Studies (CPRS) 1996). Perhaps once the Palestinian leadership sees no more hope for the realisation of a two-state solution, a similar transformation in Palestinian demands and goals could materialise. With the current developments

on the ground and the upcoming Israeli annexation, this scenario seems likely to occur sooner rather than later.

Such a transformation would have far-reaching implications on multiple fronts; it would prove an inconvenience for the 'warming ties' many Arab countries have attempted to foster with Israel, especially vis-à-vis a potential alliance against Iran (Halbfinger and Hubbard 2020). We already see signs of this through Jordan's warnings to Israel in case of annexation. It would also herald the end of the PA as we know it, declaring its mission a failure and its existence obsolete. Although many on the Zionist right might view this as a victory, it also has implications for Israel and its existence as a Zionist state. Systemic and institutional discrimination towards Palestinians both inside and outside its borders have been inherent features of Israeli society and policy (Yiftachel 2006). This will be harder to maintain without the illusion of separation that the green line provided. In the age of global solidarity, the calls for a more just and equal society will only continue to become louder.

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