

## **Imagine a solution; think Jerusalem**

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Recently, a seller at the Mahane Yehuda market offered me, along with red cherries, a villa for 200,000₪ in the neighborhood "Facing the Sea", on the coast of Gaza. Before I had a chance to answer, he said: "I don't believe you wouldn't take it". What struck me about this nightmarish proposal was how vivid and detailed the political imagination behind it was.

The thought crossed my mind again a few days later, in lead up to June 5th, the day marking the occupation of East Jerusalem (what others call "Jerusalem's unification"), as three European countries—Norway, Ireland and Spain—announced their recognition of a Palestinian state. In Israel, these announcements were almost universally perceived as a colossal threat.

Let's for a moment set aside Netanyahu, who has already proven that he is willing to jeopardize a strategic asset—like a regional agreement centered on normalization with Saudi Arabia—as long as he is not seen as supporting, even in lip service, a two-state solution; why did many figures in the Israeli media and public who have recently expressed support for a two-state solution automatically align themselves in rejection of these announcements? Surely, they should've at least discussed them openly, even if they didn't embrace them.

The automatic responses show how amorphous the two-state discourse has become. It is thrown around in the absence of any other alternative, but, after more than twenty years of delegitimization and denial, the imagination and audacity required for it, and the commitment it implies, are largely obstructed.

It is almost certainly true that there is nothing harder at this moment than to imagine a different future based on agreement and reciprocity. However, positive change will not happen any other way.

Along with the great collapse of Israelis' sense of security after October 7th, all unilateral concepts of 'managing', 'shrinking' or 'determining' the shape of the conflict—including the idea of a one-sided separation propped up by a sophisticated barrier—also collapsed.

A renewed discourse on a two-state solution must be relevant to the lives of people and the anxieties that accompany them, and it must promise a real improvement in their living conditions. At the same time, it must recognize the injustices of the occupation, on the one hand, and the interdependence of the two peoples who share a common land, on the other. It must include, in addition to elements of separation and self-determination, aspects of cooperation, equality and mutual prosperity, as well as broad civic support.

This concept is not utopian. On the contrary, it will be full of difficulties and setbacks, and there will be no shortage of actors who will take advantage of every opportunity to derail it. But it is not a fantasy either. Traces of it can be found, even within the current chaotic reality, in the mixed cities within Israel where tensions have not escalated during this period, despite relentless attempts to ignite them, and, especially, in the heart of the conflict—Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is far from offering a utopia, as my conversation with the vendor at Mahane Yehuda attests to. And yet, it is a place where all the components of the conflict converge, and where a daily encounter takes place between Israelis and Palestinians, even if under occupation and deep discrimination.

The strength of shared daily life was evident in the relative speed with which a semblance of routine was restored to the city after October 7th: the labor market, hospitals, campuses, the light rail, leisure, and commercial areas, and, yes, also the markets, quickly resumed activities.

This did not happen without difficulties or friction, not to mention the incessant incitement and repression from above. Nonetheless, an active civil society prevented an uncontrolled deterioration from taking place. Concerned residents on both sides cooperated in addressing the population's needs, and, in most cases, succeeded in protecting their communities and routines. They are also the ones who, every year on Jerusalem Day, stand against the display of hatred known as the Flag Parade, and against many other manifestations of violence and provocation in the city.

In all previous negotiations, the issue of Jerusalem was relegated to the final stages of the discussion. Now is the time to do the opposite and to think Jerusalem first.

The political imagination for a present-day outline for a two-state solution is not found around the sterilized negotiation table. It is found in the chaotic reality of Jerusalem, where issues of sovereignty, authority, and holy sites intertwine with the complex and intricate reality of a bi-national, albeit unequal, daily life.

This is the challenging yet fertile place to start imagining an inclusive solution. One based on an end to the occupation, the existence of two mutually dependent and cooperative states, broad international support, a realistic and inclusive approach to security, and two capitals in an open, diverse, and vibrant city.