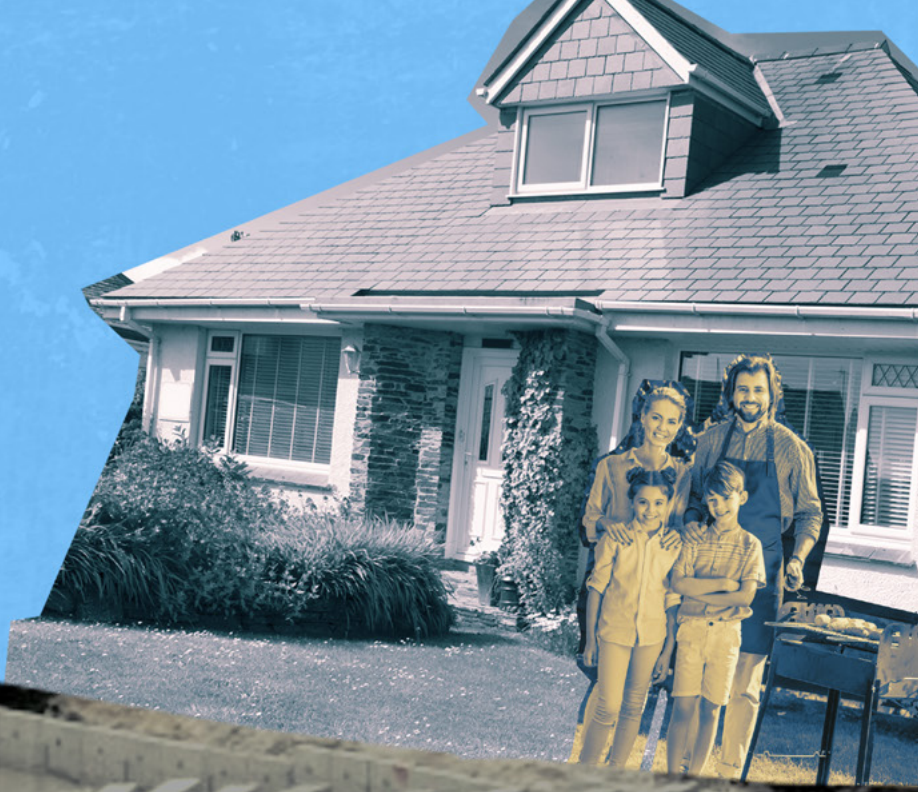


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# Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?

The Israeli left and the “separation” discourse

Meron Rapoport





# Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?

## The Israeli left and the “separation” discourse

*Meron Rapoport*

Since the first round of general elections held in April of 2019, and even more so following the third round in March 2020, a new catch phrase has appeared on the Israeli left: “Jewish-Arab partnership”. This is a practical outcome of the elections, which drove home two truths. One, that the Jewish-Israeli left is very small and must forge new alliances to break out of its political isolation. Two, that the center-left stands no chance of becoming a political majority without massive electoral support from Palestinian citizens of Israel. This explains why a Jewish-Arab alliance is now seen as crucial to challenging the large right-wing majority.

The potential gains of such a partnership are clear. Palestinian citizens make up 16% of Israel’s electorate. If their voter turnout was equal to that of Jewish citizens, their representatives in the Knesset would have 19 seats (out of a total of 120 seats), making them the third largest party in the Israeli parliament. In April 2019, the two parties representing the Palestinian minority achieved only 10 seats, due to a very low voter turnout – 49%, as opposed to 67% among Jewish voters. By March 2020 the turnout among Palestinian voters rose to 69%, giving a record 15 seats to the Joint List. In the end, the Joint List’s impressive result did not pave a way to the establishment of a center-left the government due to the

fact that Benny Gantz, the leader of Blue-and-White, preferred to support a right-wing government in the last moment, but for the first time in the last 20 years this scenario became a tangible possibility. A further rise in Palestinian voter turnout may even render the establishment of a narrow right-wing government impossible.

While the Palestinian minority is still under-represented, there is a clear over-representation of Haredis (ultra-Orthodox Jews) in the Knesset. Although this sector makes up only 8% of the general electorate, the Haredi parties had 16 seats in the last Knesset – almost double their actual proportion. The right embraced this sector years ago, and has repeatedly come into power thanks to the electoral success of Haredi parties. The same is not true of the left. Apart from the fleeting episode of Rabin’s 1992 government, the Jewish center-left has consistently ruled out cooperation with Palestinian-Israeli politicians. In the elections that took place in April 2019, then-Labor chair Avi Gabbay declared that he would not enter into a coalition with the Joint (Arab) List, while the Blue-and-White list vehemently denied any possibility of forming a bloc with “the Arab parties” to prevent a right-wing coalition. These statements likely played a role in low voter turnout among Palestinian citizens in April 2019.

Nevertheless, the atmosphere among both Jewish and Palestinian Israelis changed dramatically after the Joint List had decided to recommend Gantz to the President as their candidate to form a government in the subsequent elections rounds in September 2019 and March 2020, as well as their official governmental negotiations with Blue-and-White. Even Rabin, whose government relied on support from the representatives of the Palestinian minority (Hadash and Mada), had kept his discussions with them in 1992 away from the cameras. The strong support among the Blue-and-White voters of a coalition based on the votes of the Joint List (around 80% according to some polls) is clear evidence of the dramatic change in perception that has swept the Israeli public, both Jews and Palestinians, regarding the possibility of a Jewish-Arab partnership. The refusal of the “hawkish” elements of the Blue-and-White list to sit in a government supported “by the Arabs” eventually derailed the effort made by the two parties, yet it clearly manifested the potential of a Jewish-Arab coalition to change Israeli politics.

The motivations for such an alliance are broader than the immediate electoral potential. In recent years, the Jewish left has grown to recognize that partnership with Palestinian citizens is vital to ensuring a just, democratic and egalitarian Israeli society. Civil society is leading the way, with many NGOs now working to promote an equal Jewish-Arab partnership in Israel, such as Sikkuy or the Abraham Fund Initiatives. Such an alliance is seen as the moral response to Netanyahu’s call for Jewish voter turnout during the 2015 elections because Palestinian citizens were “swarming to the voting booths on buses”.

The passing of the Nation-State Law in 2018 added fuel to the moral indignation. Many on the Zionist left saw the law as an assault on

the very essence of Israeli society, as they wish to see it today: a state that ensures equality for all. “Part of the ethos that existed before the state [was founded] is no longer relevant,” said Prof. Mordechai Kremnitzer [in a famous interview](#) in which his voice broke when discussing his objection to the Nation-State Law. “Do you want to go back to the ethos of Jewish labor only?” he asked. In other words, Prof. Kremnitzer believes that saving Zionism as he understands it requires ensuring equality between Jews and Arabs within the state of Israel. Given this recently new recognition, it is not surprising that one of the leading NGOs established in recent years is “Standing Together”, which works to promote Jewish-Arab partnership within Israel.

*“the Jewish left has grown to recognize that partnership with Palestinian citizens is vital to ensuring a just, democratic and egalitarian Israeli society”*

## Separation as a Guiding Principle of the Zionist Left

Yet while some parts of the Zionist center-left understand the political and moral need for partnership, separation is still the guiding principle when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Separation, by mutual agreement or unilaterally, is supposed to end the friction between Israel and the Palestinians, allowing the former to preserve its “Jewish and democratic” identity. But this idea is almost diametrically opposed to the concept of partnership. True, there is a clear difference between separating Israel from the Palestinian territories (I do not use the term “Palestinian state” as not all advocates of separation support a fully independent Palestinian state) on the one hand, and an alliance between Jewish and Palestinian citizens of the Israeli state on the other. I believe, however, that this is an impossible equation: You cannot establish a genuine partnership between Palestinian

and Jewish citizens of Israel while preaching separation between Israelis and Palestinians. It just will not work.

The concept of separation is entrenched in Zionist thinking. The idea of relying on Jewish labor alone appeared as far back as the early 20th century, in the second great wave of Jewish immigration to Israel/Palestine, as part of an effort to separate the new Jewish settlers from the Arab inhabitants. This trend increased with the establishment of the British Mandate and its declaration of commitment to creating a "national home" for Jews. The Zionist leadership worked to establish separate institutions for Jews in all spheres – economy, government and, of course, military power. The central trade union, the Histadrut, also came into being as an organization that represents "Hebrew laborers", with no pretense of representing all workers regardless of ethnicity. Only in 1966 was it renamed the General Federation of Labor in Israel and began accepting Arab workers as regular members. This is not to say that no attempts were made at Jewish-Arab partnership before the state was founded, but they certainly did not represent the mainstream.

Separation also played a seminal role in the political imagining of space. While the Arabs rejected any proposal to divide the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea into an Arab state and a Jewish state, the Jewish leadership welcomed suggestions of partition. David Ben-Gurion was willing to accept the plan proposed by the Peel Commission in 1937 even though the area designated for the Jewish state was very small. The draw was that the territory of the Jewish state was supposed to be "free of Arabs" and the Arab state "free of Jews" (the numbers were, of course, unequal: 225,000 Arabs were to be evicted from the Jewish state and 1,250 Jews from the Arab state). The partition plan adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1947 largely reflected the ideas the Zionist movement presented to the UN committee that drafted it.

Expelling and encouraging hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to flee during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, and especially preventing refugees from returning, completed the mission to establish a Jewish state with maximum territory and minimal Arab presence. The young state of



Separation wall between Israel and Palestine  
Source: [Flickr/ David Lisbona](#)

Israel “separated” from most of the Arabs who had lived in the territories it took over in the 1948 war, imposing on those who remained a military regime that restricted their freedom of movement throughout the country and which was abolished 18 years later (1966).

**”The state of Israel was founded largely in keeping with the idea of separating from Palestinian-Arabs”**

It is important to note that this was not the only option considered within the Zionist movement. There were alternative suggestions, such as those put forward by Brit Shalom and by other movements and individuals. Even the historical leaders of the Zionist movement, such as Ze’ev Jabotinsky and David Ben-Gurion, did not necessarily imagine a Jewish “nation-state” in its current form, as Dr. Dmitry Shumsky shows in his new book, *Beyond the Nation-State: The Zionist Political Imagination from Pinsker to Ben-Gurion*. Clearly, however, the state of Israel was founded largely in keeping with the idea of separating from Palestinian-Arabs, both domestically and beyond its borders.

This helps explain why Israeli politicians have been drawn to the concept of separation as the basis for a solution to the conflict ever since Israel and the PLO began negotiations following the first Intifada and the first Gulf War. While the 1993 Oslo Accords did not mention separation, just as they did not refer to two states, over the years these two concepts have become intertwined and identified with the Oslo process. There was political and military logic to this, but also the pull of strong persuasive power. The idea of separation is seen as a way to persuade Jewish-Israelis to support an end to the occupation and the establishment of a Palestinian state. “When we were asked

how we work with the public on the issue of Oslo and the Palestinian state,” recalled Yossi Beilin, the man who led Rabin and Shimon Peres down the path of negotiation, “we came to understand that nothing is easier than hatred, and that with the slogan ‘we go here – they go there’, even people who aren’t particularly dovish and have no special interest in the rights of the Palestinians will agree that is the best solution.” Ehud Barak took this rationale one step further by adopting

Robert Frost’s line, “Good fences make good neighbors”, distorting the poet’s intention along the way. “We have to leave them (the Palestinians) behind, outside the agreed borders”, he said in a 1998 interview.

## Separation in Practice

Since Barak’s term in power (1999-2001), separation has become the governing principle of the center-left’s discourse on political and security solutions. The idea was that “getting rid” of the Palestinians would improve security, free Israel from the burden of controlling a foreign people, garner international support for ending the occupation and, above all, eliminate the “demographic threat” which the millions of Palestinians living under Israeli control in Gaza and the West Bank pose to the “Jewish and democratic” identity of the state.

The idea was also applied in practice. The Separation Barrier was ostensibly constructed to stop terror attacks during the second Intifada, yet it would not have gone up without the underlying goal of creating a boundary between Israel and the Palestinian territories. The unilateral withdrawal from Gaza was also based on the concept of separation, which Ariel Sharon took one step further. Instead of furthering peace, the withdrawal became

another way to stall progress towards a final agreement. "The plan supplies the amount of formaldehyde necessary so that there will not be a political process with the Palestinians," said Dov Weisglass, Sharon's adviser, in a [famous interview](#).

Slowly, as the peace process waned after the failure of the Camp David summit in 2000, the idea of separation began to take on a life of its own. By now, it has become less of a means for reaching a deal with the Palestinians and more an instrument for criticizing annexation plans proposed by the right. "The right is leading us towards a bi-national state with an Arab majority," goes the argument, "and only separation can save the Jewish state." The fear factor is intensified by painting the idea of separation in blatantly anti-Arab colors.

What is interesting, not to mention troubling, is that this discourse emerged from people who are affiliated with the center-left, or at least make a show of supporting an agreement with the Palestinians. The appallingly-named "Save Jewish Jerusalem" movement includes members such as Haim Ramon, a former Labor MK and minister, and

Shaul Arieli, a researcher who specializes in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a known advocate of the two-state solution. The two are far from being identified with the right. In 2016, the movement launched a campaign cautioning that unless Israel separates from the "villages" it annexed in East Jerusalem, the entire city will wind up with an Arab mayor.

Commanders for Israel's Security – a group of hundreds of former senior defense officials [calling for an agreement with the Palestinians](#) based on "two states for two peoples" – went even further. In a particularly blatant campaign, the movement produced a series of videos designed to convince the public that Israel must immediately "divorce" from the Palestinians, before they fulfill their plan to take over Israel with a demographic majority. In one video, an interviewee compared annexing the Palestinians in the West Bank to [voluntarily introducing "cancer into our bodies"](#).

This toxic discourse has affected politicians, too. "We need to get the Palestinians out of our lives. There won't be peace in our time" [said Yair Lapid](#), the head of the centrist



←

Publicity video of the Jewish Jerusalem Movement- Source: [Save Jewish Jerusalem](#)

Yesh Atid party, in 2016. “What we have to do is build a high wall and get them out of our sight,” he explained. While the Labor party did not adopt such harsh language, its political platform in the first elections round in 2019 centered on separation, proposing a referendum on the question whether “the Palestinian refugee camps and villages of Shu’afat, Issawiya and others are part of Jerusalem, the eternal capital of Israel”. The Blue and White party did not incorporate the ideas of either separation or two states into its platform, but the fact that it is headed by three former chiefs of staff brings it very close to the discourse of Commanders for Israel’s Security. As stated, the idea of separation has become more of a political currency in Israel than an actual plan for resolving the conflict.

## Challenges of Separation

Yet advocating for separation has not yielded impressive electoral results. Labor offered unilateral separation in Jerusalem in an apparent attempt to garner more Jewish votes (the suggestion itself is legally almost impossible, as it involves canceling the residency status of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in East Jerusalem without giving them any other civil status), and crashed in the elections of April 2019, dropping from 24 seats to a mere six – 5% of the general vote. Yair Lapid’s rather violent version of “divorce” from the Palestinians did not help him electorally, either.

The political career of former foreign minister Tzipi Livni is particularly interesting in this context. As head of the centrist Kadima party, she inherited the idea of separation from Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert and made it a key element in her credo. Livni was also the first to demand that the Palestinians recognize Israel as “Jewish” in the 2008 Annapolis talks. She made this point integral

to the philosophy of separation, imagining the border between Israel and Palestine as not only political but also a way to demarcate identity. “I want to maintain a Jewish majority and say goodbye,” she said in a January 2019 interview. Yet Livni found that these political goods are no longer in popular demand and was forced to retire from political life. Her departure from politics apparently reflects dwindling support for separation, at least as reflected by voters.

The failure of this idea runs deeper than the election results. A fundamental tenet of the separation philosophy is that Israel cannot trust the Palestinians and must rely on itself. Therefore, the argument goes, Israel must strive to separate from the Palestinians as soon as possible, before they become a majority. Yet it seems that peddling this urgency reinforced the belief among Jewish-Israelis that, as the Palestinians cannot be trusted, there is no partner for an agreement. Ehud Barak’s statement after the failure of Camp David has now become virtually a consensus. If indeed there is no partner for an agreement, maintaining the status quo appears to be the best alternative. Moreover, the Palestinians, and the Arab world in general, are currently in a weak position and seem unable to exert any meaningful pressure on Israel – whether military, political or economic. In other words, advocating for separation actually achieved the opposite of the desired effect and helped cement the status quo. This indirectly bolstered Benjamin Netanyahu’s power, as the champion of the status quo, instead of working to undermine his hold over government.

The discourse of separation has also caused internal damage to the left. In the years that have passed since the Oslo Accords, almost all center-left leaders have given the

*“The idea of separation has become more of a political currency in Israel than an actual plan for resolving the conflict”*

impression that the solution to the conflict is quite simple – evacuate settlements and divide Jerusalem. International support reinforced the belief that this solution is feasible and just needs a bit of an extra push. This conviction has prevented many on the Jewish left from acknowledging the changes that are taking place on the ground – the elimination of the Green Line from the Israeli mind, the creeping annexation of the West Bank, the growing integration between Jews and Palestinians throughout the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, and the Palestinian disenchantment with the two-state solution due to the failure of the Palestinian Authority. What remains is largely an illusion, fueling a complacency among many leftists, that the occupation and the creeping annexation are temporary.

***”Advocating for separation actually achieved the opposite of the desired effect and helped cement the status quo ”***

This discourse is also harmful in another fundamental sense, which brings us back to the starting point of this article – the hope of Jewish-Arab partnership in Israel. The philosophy of separation is based on the idea of preserving Israel as a “Jewish” state. We Israelis (in actual fact, Jews) must separate from the Palestinians in order to preserve the Jewish identity of the state. This approach stands no chance of enlisting the Palestinian minority in Israel. I recall a speech by MK Ayman Odeh, head of the Joint Arab List and of the party Hadash (the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality), in an event held by the leftwing movement Peace Now just after the 2015 elections. He began by asking the Arabs in the audience to raise their hands. Of the thousands present, only a smattering of hands went up. Odeh’s message was clear: Palestinians in Israel

cannot relate to talk of “saving the Jewish state”. In a rather absurd twist, the rightwing leaders who advocate annexation – from MK Tzipi Hotovely of the Likud party to President Reuven Rivlin – are those who are willing to grant equal rights to Palestinians in the West Bank, a possibility the center-left leaders present as a threat. This is a complete reversal of roles between the Israeli right and left. The left is supposed to support equality, not caution against it.

What are Palestinian citizens of Israel supposed to feel when they travel along a major highway and see huge billboards put up by the anti-annexation organization Commanders for Israel’s Security, calling for “divorce” from the Palestinians? While the Palestinian minority in Israel has a complex relationship with the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, it certainly does not want to “divorce” from them, given their close family ties and deep national connection. If the center-left truly recognizes the need to promote Jewish-Arab partnership in Israel and hopes to ever get Palestinian voters on board, it cannot make separation and the “Jewish state” the focal point of its ideology.

## Rethinking the Separation Discourse

That is why it is time to rethink the discourse of separation. The concept must be checked against reality, and especially vis-à-vis the idea of two states for two peoples. These are two different suggestions. Just as you can achieve separation without two states, e.g. the Gaza withdrawal and other unilateral proposals, there can also be two states without separation.

This is exactly what the Israeli-Palestinian movement “Land for All” calls for. On the one hand, the movement supports politically



separating into two independent states, Israel and Palestine, in order to fulfill the right of each nation to self-determination and because it is the only realistic way to end the occupation. There is an international consensus on this solution, enshrined in a series of resolutions issued by international institutions ranging from the UN to the EU and the Arab League. The movement also believes it is neither possible nor desirable to base these two states on the logic of separation, and that they should be based on partnership, while respecting the emotional ties of each of the groups to the territories beyond the "Green Line". Thus, the movement's proposed framework talks of two states and one homeland.

***"It is time to replace the separation paradigm with a paradigm of partnership"***

The idea of separation ignores two significant features of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. First, 140 years after Zionist settlement first began, there is now a mixed Jewish-Arab demographic between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Arabs and Jews live side by side – and sometimes together in the space between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean. You can love or hate this reality, but you cannot deny it. Second, both groups by and large see the entire territory as their historical homeland. Palestine and the Land of Israel actually overlap. To Palestinians, Jaffa and Haifa (within Israel proper) are no less important than Ramallah and Jenin (in the West Bank); for many Jews, Hebron and Bethlehem (in the West Bank) bear at least as much emotional weight as Ramat Hasharon and Kiryat Gat (within Israel proper). Any political solution must take this mixed demographic and emotional map into account, which the separation supporters fail to do.

That is why we believe it is time to replace the separation paradigm with a paradigm of partnership. This would be a partnership between two independent states, with freedom of movement between them and gradually freedom of residence; with Jerusalem as an open city, the capital of both states, and shared institutions that govern matters such as security, human rights, the economy and the environment. Israelis, including those currently defined as settlers, can live as Israeli citizens under Palestinian sovereignty, thus resolving the question of the settlements without massively evacuating settlers or compromising Palestinian sovereignty. Palestinians, including those defined as refugees, can live as Palestinian citizens under Israeli sovereignty, which will address the right of return without undermining Israeli sovereignty. Jerusalem can be an open city with a special regime, under the joint sovereignty of both countries.

This solution is not simple, but neither is the present reality. It is a road map that recognizes the complexity of the situation. No less importantly: Only a partnership between Jews and Arabs throughout this territory can be the foundation for a stable political alliance between Jews and Arabs within Israel. The elections teach us that such a partnership is necessary, but requires a shared political vision. I believe this vision is two states in one homeland.

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His crucial reporting has been recognized time and again, including his groundbreaking investigative coverage of the theft of olive trees from Palestinian owners during the construction of the separation barrier, which won the Napoli International Prize for Journalism. He is also a long-time

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