

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Assessing the two-state solution: feasibility, challenges, and prospects

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Abstract

The issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the possible realisation of a Palestinian State as part of a two-state solution is at the centre of the international debate. Despite the international consensus on the idea of two states that can peacefully coexist, actual progresses towards this solution is rather limited.

One of the main issues concerns the definition of the borders of a possible Palestinian State. Although the 1967 line is often referred to as the basis for the two-state solution, Israeli settlements in the West Bank complicate the definition of clear and continuous borders for the Palestinian state, as do the aspirations that both Israelis and Palestinians have for Jerusalem.

Added to this, we have the absence of a compact political Palestinian leadership, given that Fatah, which controls the Palestinian National Authority in the West Bank, supports the two-state solution, while Hamas, which governs the Gaza Strip, does not recognise Israel's right to exist.

Meanwhile, Israelis have several concerns that a Palestinian State could be a threat for their existence. For this reason, Israel would like to maintain control over strategic areas, while the Palestinians want a fully sovereign State without the presence of Israeli forces.

The two-state solution is however still seen by researchers and various political figures as the best compromise, without diplomatic progress though, the risk of violent

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escalation and further regional destabilisation will always remain high. Success depends on concrete structural reforms within Palestinian governance, sustained external diplomatic guarantees, and strategic recalibrations in Israeli security policy.

Keywords

Two-state solution, Palestinian Question, Gaza Strip, Hamas

Introduction

The two-state solution has long been the dominant framework for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, endorsed by the United Nations, the European Union, the United States, and much of the international community. It envisions two sovereign states, Israel and Palestine, coexisting peacefully. First formally articulated in the 1993 Oslo Accords, the model is now increasingly questioned due to decades of stalled negotiations, expanding Israeli settlements, internal Palestinian divisions, and recurrent violence.² The events of October 7, 2023, and the ensuing Gaza war have further undermined prospects for its implementation.

This paper critically examines the feasibility of the two-state solution currently, considering recent developments and structural obstacles. While still the most internationally supported proposal, the model appears increasingly disconnected from political realities. The central argument is that, without substantial transformation in the internal politics of both Israel and Palestine, and a recalibrated international approach, the two-state solution plan is no longer viable. Rather than assuming its feasibility, the study interrogates the conditions that sustain or impede it.

One of the main obstacles is the continued expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, which many experts and institutions, like the International

² Mohammed Omer, Petter Bauck & Össur Skarphéðinsson, *The Oslo Accords 1993–2013: A Critical Assessment* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2017), 85, 89.

Court of Justice or Amnesty International, consider a violation of international law.³ Moreover, internal divisions between Palestinian factions, particularly between Fatah and Hamas, further complicate the situation, making it difficult for the Palestinians to present a unified position in negotiations.⁴

Despite these difficulties, international organisations such as the United Nations, as well as various countries, including the United States and the European Union, have repeatedly expressed their support for this solution and tried to mediate between the parties. However, without genuine and mutual commitment from both Israelis and Palestinians, the realisation of an independent Palestinian State remains a distant goal.

The analysis of this work is based on a qualitative approach that synthesizes empirical evidence, academic literature, and recent political developments. Rather than presenting a descriptive chronology, the paper engages critically with the internal and external dynamics that shape the conflict. The study aims to contribute to the academic and policy-oriented discourse by not only reassessing the two-state solution considering contemporary challenges, but also by framing it as a contested and evolving political project rather than a fixed endpoint.

The paper proceeds by first situating the debate within a broader theoretical context, drawing on the work of scholars, as well as more recent research on hybrid and incomplete forms of statehood. It then provides a comprehensive literature review that examines both classical and contemporary positions on statehood, conflict resolution, and Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Particular attention is paid to the hybrid nature of governance in Gaza and the West Bank, the evolution of Israeli settlement policy, and the shifting discourse around alternatives to the two-state model, including the events of October 7, 2023, and the devastating Gaza war that followed represent a turning point.

³ Idith Zertal & Akiva Eldar, *Lords of the Land: The War Over Israel's Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967-2007* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), 21, 23.

⁴ Jonathan Schanzer, *Hamas vs. Fatah: The Struggle for Palestine* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 143, 153.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative approach based on the analysis of primary sources, including international reports, official declarations, and peace initiatives, combined with a critical review of secondary academic literature and expert analyses. This method enables a comprehensive understanding of the multiple factors affecting the Israeli-Palestinian dynamics.

The value of this research lies in offering an updated, critical assessment of the feasibility of the two-state solution at a time of heightened instability and shifting geopolitical alliances. By contextualising recent political developments and mediation efforts, the paper aims to contribute to a clearer understanding of the complex realities on the ground and provides insights for future policymaking and conflict resolution strategies.

1. Theoretical framework of scepticism on the two-state solution

The persistent failure to achieve a two-state solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has stimulated a rich academic debate across multiple disciplines. The growing expansion of Israeli settlements, the political fragmentation among Palestinians, and the absence of sustained negotiations have led some analysts to argue that the conditions necessary for the creation of a separate Palestinian state no longer exist. As a result, alternative frameworks, most notably the one-state solution, have gained renewed attention. To frame this study, the theoretical contributions of sceptical authors on the two-state solution, like Edward Said, Ilan Pappé, and Ian Lustick, are particularly instructive. These scholars, though varied in methodology and orientation, offer essential insights into the identity, power, and security dynamics that continuously reshape and often undermine the viability of a two-state paradigm.

Edward Said's work remains foundational for understanding the broader ideological undercurrents that inform policy decisions and public opinion about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In his works, Said critically examines how Western representations and narratives have framed Palestinians as peripheral or invisible

actors.⁵ His perspective is crucial for understanding why, even within international diplomacy, Palestinian aspirations have historically been subordinated or conditional. Regarding the two-state solution, Said was sceptical, seeing it as often a rhetorical device that failed to address the asymmetry of power and historical injustice. However, he acknowledged that practical solutions would require a major reconfiguration of dominant narratives and an equal recognition of Palestinian nationhood alongside Israeli sovereignty. Said's emphasis on representation and recognition frames a major challenge facing the two-state model: the need to go beyond territorial compromise to a reimagining of historical narratives that have perpetuated exclusion.⁶

Ilan Pappé offers vital historical context for contemporary debates, and in terms of the two-state solution, Pappé is profoundly sceptical: he suggests that what is often presented as a peace process contributed to strengthening the Israeli presence in the contested territories, hindering Palestinian political-territorial cohesion.⁷ His argument challenges diplomatic optimism by highlighting how historical patterns of control, rather than episodic crises, undermine the two-state prospect.

According to Ian Lustick, the possibility of partition has been eroded by demographic, political, and infrastructural developments, making the notion of two independent, sovereign states increasingly impractical.⁸ He argues that international support for the two-state framework persists more out of inertia and diplomatic convenience than an honest assessment of conditions on the ground. In Lustick's view, acknowledging the reality of a single political entity is a necessary first step toward devising new strategies for achieving equality and rights for both peoples.

This emerging discourse does not suggest a fully formed or unified vision of a one-state solution. Rather, it encompasses a variety of proposals ranging from a binational democratic state to a single state that guarantees equal rights irrespective of ethnicity

⁵ Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 54, 60.

⁶ Ibid., 203, 209.

⁷ Ilan Pappé, *The Biggest Prison on Earth: A History of the Occupied Territories* (London, Oneworld, 2017), 192.

⁸ Ian Lustick, *Paradigm Lost: From Two-State Solution to One-State Reality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 123, 128.

or religion. However, substantial obstacles remain, including profound national identities, mutual distrust, security concerns, and the reluctance of both Israeli and Palestinian mainstream leaderships to embrace such a radical reimagining of the conflict.

While this paper focuses primarily on the ongoing challenges and prospects associated with the two-state solution, it is crucial to recognise that the growing debate about the one-state alternative reflects the changing realities on the ground. Nevertheless, even the one-state solution presents its own profound challenges, including the need to reconcile competing nationalisms, address historical grievances, and build a political system capable of managing deep-seated divisions.

2. The main difficulties of a two-state solution

Despite the numerous difficulties, the two-state solution, supported by several States, like the Italian Government, and by the UN Secretary General, continues to represent the most desirable option with respect to the perpetuation of the conflict. This is also supported by the fact that numerous Heads of State, speaking at the UN General Assembly, have reiterated that the two-state solution is the only viable prospect.⁹

However, the two-state solution is often reduced to a vague formulation lacking operational detail, referring implicitly or explicitly to the Oslo Accords, without adding anything else constructive as regards implementation. First, thirty years have passed since the agreements, and consequently world, regional and local politics have changed, as has the Israeli military occupation.¹⁰ Unlike thirty years ago, today 700,000 Israeli

⁹ United Nations News, *Guterres: Two-State solution the only path to a just, lasting peace* (2024), available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/01/1146097>;

Italian Government, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, *President Meloni meets with the President of Palestine* (2024), available at <https://www.governo.it/en/media/president-meloni-meets-president-palestine/27274>.

¹⁰ Karen Tenenbaum & Ehud Eiran, 'Israeli Settlement Activity in the West Bank and Gaza: A Brief History' (2005) *Negotiation Journal*, Vol. 21 (2), 171, 175.

settlers live in the Palestinian territories, with the consequence that Palestinian villages are separated from each other.¹¹

But first, an essential aspect in analysing the viability of a two-state solution involves a careful examination of the stances held by Hamas and Fatah. This internal division makes it complex to establish representative and cohesive negotiations on the Palestinian side, compromising the possibility of reaching an agreement.¹² Fatah, leading the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in the West Bank, officially supports the two-state solution, endorsing the 1967 borders as a basis for negotiations.¹³ Conversely, Hamas, which has controlled the Gaza Strip since 2007, historically rejected Israel's right to exist and opposed the two-state solution.¹⁴ However, in recent years, particularly following the 2017 Hamas Political Document, the organisation has expressed conditional openness to a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders without formally recognising Israel. This nuanced shift illustrates Hamas's attempt to adapt to political realities while maintaining its ideological foundations.

The rift between Hamas and Fatah is rooted in ideological, political, and strategic divergences. After Hamas's electoral victory in 2006 and its subsequent violent takeover of Gaza in 2007, a profound schism emerged. Fatah embraced diplomatic negotiations and international legitimacy, whereas Hamas adopted a more militant approach. The division was exacerbated by external interventions and the differing governance models in the West Bank and Gaza, with Hamas subjected to economic blockades and international isolation.¹⁵

¹¹ United Nations, *Human Rights Council Hears that 700,000 Israeli Settlers are Living Illegally in the Occupied West Bank* (2023), available at <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/human-rights-council-hears-that-700000-israeli-settlers-are-living-illegally-in-the-occupied-west-bank-meeting-summary-excerpts/>.

¹² Subhash Singh, *The Second Partition of Palestine: Hamas–Fatah Struggle for Power* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 154, 158.

¹³ Jonathan Schanzer, *Hamas vs. Fatah: The Struggle for Palestine* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 13, 19.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Alaa Tartir, 'The Evolution and Reform of Palestinian Security Forces 1993-2013' (2015) *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, Vol. 4 (1), 8.

Among Palestinians themselves, representation is fragmented. While Fatah historically enjoyed broader support, Hamas's standing has fluctuated, often strengthened by perceptions of Fatah's corruption and failure to deliver tangible progress. Polls suggest significant portions of the Palestinian population are disillusioned with both factions, underlining the urgent need for renewed political legitimacy through elections.¹⁶

With the Battle of Gaza in 2007, Hamas gained control of the Gaza Strip; this event divided the Palestinians politically and territorially, with Abbas' Fatah retaining power in the West Bank and internationally recognised as the official Palestinian National Authority.

After the occupation of the Gaza Strip by Hamas, the PNA was added to the list of its enemies, in addition to Israel and al-Fatah. The latter, under the leadership of Abbas, formally distanced itself from Hamas and the management of Gaza, establishing political bodies of its own and taking over the parliament in Ramallah. Moreover, Abbas immediately dismissed Haniyeh from his role as prime minister of the national unity government, replacing him with Salam Fayyad as head of the new emergency government formed on 17 June.¹⁷ From this moment onwards, the political and territorial divide became evident. While the population of Gaza suffered from hunger and the funding blockade, the inhabitants of the West Bank continued to receive external financial aid.¹⁸

Thus, the new government in the Gaza Strip was faced with numerous challenges from the very first days of operation. Firstly, the lack of qualified personnel weighed on the government officials: this was mainly because of politicians moving to the West Bank or other neighbouring countries in the aftermath of the al-Fatah boycott. Added

¹⁶ Omar Rahman, 'Amidst Unprecedented Threats, Palestinians Face Crisis of Leadership' in ISPI *Conflict and Change in the Mena Region Geopolitics and Geoeconomics* (2024), Mediterranean Dialogues, available at <https://www.ispionline.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/DOSSIER-ISPI-2024-Conflict-and-Change-in-MENA-Region.pdf>.

¹⁷ Paola Caridi, *Hamas. From resistance to the regime (Hamas. Dalla resistenza al regime)* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2023), 70.

¹⁸ Ibid.

to this was the termination of international financing, which prevented the necessary expenses to guarantee public services, social welfare and political campaigns.

The solutions adopted were drastic, but effective: salaries were reduced, and temporary measures were taken to fill in the gaps of the administrative system. Despite serious managerial and economic challenges, as the months passed Hamas managed to establish a degree of governmental stability.

After the civil war between Hamas and al-Fatah in 2007, the situation in the Palestinian territories became extremely tense. In fact, the deep rift within the Palestinian leadership led to a climate of distrust and mistrust between the parties. The need to work towards a peace agreement no longer concerned only the relations between Israel and the Palestinians, but the Arab organisations themselves. Reconciliation between Hamas and al-Fatah became a crucial issue to restore Palestinian unity and strengthen their position in negotiations with their Israeli counterparts.

However, thanks to Chinese mediation efforts, reconciliation processes between Hamas and the various Palestinian organisations have intensified significantly since July 2024, especially after the events of 7 October.¹⁹ According to analyst Gian Luca Atzori, an agreement was reached to set up a provisional government of national reconciliation to administer both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.²⁰ This step represents an important development in the internal relations between the historically

¹⁹ Middle East Eye, *Hamas, Fatah and other Palestinian groups sign 'national unity' deal in China* (2024), available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-fatah-and-other-palestinian-groups-sign-national-unity-deal-china>.

²⁰ Ahmed Aboudouh, Chatham House, *The Fatah–Hamas agreement increases Chinese influence in Palestinian affairs. But the road to unity is rocky* (2024), available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/07/fatah-hamas-agreement-increases-chinese-influence-palestinian-affairs-road-unity-rocky>;

China Files, *In China and Asia – Talks between Hamas and Fatah in Beijing (In Cina e Asia – Colloqui tra Hamas e Fatah a Pechino)* (2024), available at <https://www.china-files.com/in-cina-e-asia-colloqui-tra-hamas-e-fatah-a-pechino/>.

fragmented Palestinian factions and aims to strengthen political and administrative unity in view of future international negotiations.

Chinese mediation in this context is part of a broader picture of China's growing interest in the Middle East, a region that is strategic for its economic and geopolitical implications. China has recently intensified its role as a diplomatic facilitator, as also demonstrated by the Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement agreement signed in Beijing in March 2023.²¹ This new Chinese approach and role has been welcomed with interest by many parties, as it represents an alternative to traditional Western mediators, often perceived as biased or unable to achieve concrete results.

The agreement between Hamas and the other Palestinian organisations envisages, in addition to the creation of an interim government, the launch of a process to prepare for legislative and presidential elections in the Palestinian territories, which have not been held since 2006.²² This represents an opportunity to overcome the internal divisions that have been hindering the progress of the Palestinian cause for years. However, many challenges remain, including resistance from some more radical factions and external pressure from Israel and its allies, which view with concern a possible consolidation of Palestinian unity.

Sources such as Middle East Eye and Al Jazeera have reported that Chinese mediation has also found fertile ground due to growing frustration among Palestinians over the apparent stalemate in the peace process and the inability of the international

²¹ Yasmine Farouk, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Riyadh's Motivations Behind the Saudi-Iran Deal* (2023), available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/03/riyadhs-motivations-behind-the-saudi-iran-deal?lang=en>.

²² The Guardian, *Hamas and Fatah agree to create committee to run postwar Gaza Strip* (2024), available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/03/hamas-and-fatah-agree-to-create-committee-to-run-postwar-gaza-strip>.

community to intervene effectively.²³ Moreover, Beijing leveraged its historical neutrality in the Israeli-Palestinian issue to gain credibility as a mediator.²⁴

This development could mark a turning point, not only for Palestinian domestic politics, but also for the overall balance of power in the Middle East. The main challenge remains to translate the agreements reached into tangible results on the ground, preventing historical divisions from resurfacing and undermining the fragile balance that has just been built.

After briefly explaining one of the elements of difficulty in reaching a negotiation on the two-state solution, it is necessary to talk about the territorial question; indeed, one of the main obstacles concerns the clear definition of the borders of both States. The 1967 line, known as the ‘green line’, is often considered the basis for delineating the borders between Israel and Palestine.²⁵ However, the constantly increasing presence of Israeli settlements in the West Bank makes it difficult to draw clear and continuous borders, complicating the territorial configuration and delineation of a possible Palestinian State.

Added to this is the topic of Jerusalem, one of the most complex and symbolic issue in the entire conflict. Jerusalem represents a place of enormous religious, historical, and cultural value for Jews and Muslims.²⁶ Both sides claim the city as their capital: Israel considers it its indivisible capital, while the Palestinians aspire to make East Jerusalem

²³ Al Jazeera, *Hamas and Fatah sign unity deal in Beijing aimed at Gaza governance* (2024), available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/23/palestinian-rivals-hamas-and-fatah-sign-unity-deal-brokered-by-china>.

²⁴ Anmol Kumar & Hari Yadav, *The Diplomat*, *China's Ambitious Efforts to Expand its Influence in the Israel-Palestine Issue* (2024), available at <https://thediplomat.com/2024/07/chinas-ambitious-efforts-to-expand-its-influence-in-the-israel-palestine-issue/>.

²⁵ Britannica, *Israel-Palestine Conflict Explained: History, Maps, & Dates* (2024), available at <https://www.britannica.com/explore/israeli-palestinian-conflicts>.

²⁶ Kamal-deen Olawale Sulaiman, ‘Jerusalem as a Uniting Factor for Muslims and Christians: Historical and Scriptural Grounds’ (2014) *IAFOR Journal of Arts & Humanities*, Vol. 2 (1).

the capital of their future State.²⁷ This dual claim makes the city a central and particularly sensitive point of contention. Several proposals have been made over the years, like the Clinton Parameters in 2000 or the Olmert-Abbas Talks in 2007, including the division of the city or its shared management, but both solutions present significant challenges.²⁸ Partition would risk creating further tensions and physical barriers, while shared management would require a level of cooperation and trust that appears difficult to achieve at present.

Furthermore, regarding Israeli settlement policies in the West Bank which we wrote about above, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has ruled that Israeli presence in the occupied Palestinian territories is illegal, violating international laws that prohibit the use of force to acquire territory.²⁹ According to the advisory opinion requested by the UN General Assembly, the occupation of these territories violates the fundamental principle that bans the acquisition of territory with the use of force. The Court also emphasised that Israel's policies in the West Bank infringe upon Palestinian people's right to self-determination, a universally recognised right. Accordingly, member States and international organisations are urged to recognise this situation as illegitimate and to take action to ensure compliance with international law.³⁰

Despite these stances, the situation on the ground remains complex and characterised by growing tensions. The international community, while formally recognising the Palestinians' right to an independent and sovereign State, struggles to

²⁷ Moshe Hirsch, Deborah Housen-Couriel & Ruth Lapidoth, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, *Whither Jerusalem?: Proposals and Positions Concerning the future of Jerusalem* (The Hague, Kluwer Law International, 1995) 18, 22.

²⁸ Galia Golan, 'Israel and Peace Negotiations', in Poosapati Sanjeevi Kumaraswamy (eds), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Israel* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021) 1, 13.

²⁹ United Nations, *International justice: the ICJ demands 'the end of Israel's presence' in the Occupied Palestinian Territory* (2024), Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, available at <https://unric.org/en/international-justice-the-icj-demands-the-end-of-israels-presence-in-the-occupied-palestinian-territory/>.

³⁰ Amnesty International, *ICJ opinion declaring Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories unlawful is historic vindication of Palestinians' rights* (2024), available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/icj-opinion-declaring-israels-occupation-of-palestinian-territories-unlawful-is-historic-vindication-of-palestinians-rights/>.

translate declarations into concrete action. Diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions have so far failed to reverse the trend of settlement expansion or to create the conditions for effective negotiations. On the contrary, the continuing aggravation of the humanitarian situation in the Palestinian territories, coupled with the increasing militarisation of the conflict, risks further fuelling the cycle of violence and mistrust between the two sides.

In this context, it is evident that a sustainable solution requires not only territorial compromises, but also a change of perspective on the part of both leaderships. It must be recognised that the security and prosperity of one country cannot be achieved at the expense of the other. A sustainable resolution is more likely to emerge through a framework that accounts for the political, social, and security needs of both parties.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to briefly revisit the classical definitions of statehood; what are the characteristics of a State? In political philosophy, the essential characteristics of a State are generally identified through a series of distinctive elements that allow it to be defined as an autonomous and organised political structure.³¹

In addition to the community of individuals that compose it, the institutional apparatus, and the legal norms, there exist distinctive elements that the Palestinian State lacks today, namely:

1. International recognition: both Alexander Wendt and Charles Tilly remind that recognition by the international community helps to define a State's identity and his position in the international system.³² Currently, Palestine is recognised by 147 States, but not by Israel and the US.³³ Palestine must have an active role in the international system, interacting with other States through diplomatic relations, treaties and agreements;

³¹ Owen Fiss, 'Why the state?' (1987) *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 100 (4), 781, 794.

³² Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11, 22.

³³ Al Jazeera, *Mapping which countries recognise Palestine in 2024* (2024), available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/22/mapping-which-countries-recognise-palestine-in-2024>.

2. The monopoly of the legitimate use of violence: according to Max Weber, one of the fundamental characteristics of States is the legitimate monopoly of the use of force within the boundaries of its territory.³⁴ As stated by the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority (PA) is authorised to maintain an internal security force, with tasks limited to maintaining public order and internal security in the territories under its control, but in practice it does not allow for a regular army.³⁵ This is one of the major critical issue;
3. A well-defined territory: as political scientist John Agnew reminds us, the State possesses a geographical area delimited by well-established borders, within which it exercises its power and controls access.³⁶ He also stresses the territorial continuity in an unfragmented territory, while the Israeli settlements in West Bank violate Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.³⁷

To these three characteristics, I would add economic independence. In addition to the exorbitant costs of rebuilding Gaza, estimated by the UN at 40 billion dollars and taking about 16 years, the Palestinians will need financial support from the international community to establish the economic infrastructure necessary for the functioning of a sovereign state.³⁸

While classical definitions of statehood remain analytically useful, they do not fully capture the complex reality of political authority in contexts like the Palestinian

³⁴ Max Weber, David Owen (ed) & Tracy B. Strong (ed), *The Vocation Lectures: 'Science as a Vocation', 'Politics as a Vocation'* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 33.

³⁵ Alaa Tartir, 'The Evolution and Reform of Palestinian Security Forces 1993-2013' (2015) *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, Vol. 4 (1), 8.

³⁶ John Agnew, 'The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory' (1994) *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 1 (1), 53, 80.

³⁷ Amnesty International, *Chapter 3: Israeli Settlements and International Law* (2019), available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/01/chapter-3-israeli-settlements-and-international-law/>.

³⁸ Jason Burke & Lorenzo Tondo, The Guardian, 'Rebuilding homes in Gaza will cost \$40bn and take 16 years, UN finds' (2024), available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/02/rebuilding-homes-in-gaza-will-cost-40bn-and-take-16-years-un-finds>.

territories. In this regard, scholarship like Criekemans or Mislán has turned to the notion of ‘wannabe states’ to describe entities that fall short of full sovereignty yet exhibit some of the institutional and symbolic characteristics of statehood.³⁹

Hybrid statehood refers to political entities that possess fragmented sovereignty, contested legitimacy, and uneven capacity to govern. These are neither fully failed nor fully functioning states, but rather fluid configurations of authority that combine formal governmental structures with informal or non-state power networks. In such settings, the lines between state and non-state actors blur, producing a patchwork of authority, legality, and service provision.

The Palestinian Authority and the Hamas administration in Gaza can both be understood through this lens. The PA exercises administrative and security control in parts of the West Bank under the terms of the Oslo Accords but remains dependent on external financial aid and Israeli coordination for basic governance and mobility. It lacks control over borders, airspace, and much of the territory nominally assigned to it, thereby failing to meet Weberian or Dahlian standards of statehood. Nevertheless, the PA has developed the bureaucratic features and symbolic apparatus of a state, including ministries, elections, and diplomatic missions abroad.

Similarly, Hamas’s rule over Gaza since 2007 reflects elements of hybrid governance. While internationally unrecognized and designated a terrorist organisation by several states, Hamas maintains internal security, tax collection, judicial structures, and public service provision in the Strip. Hamas’s ability to deliver certain forms of order and governance in a highly constrained and besieged environment complicates any simplistic classification of Gaza as ‘stateless’. Instead, both the PA and Hamas exhibit forms of what Migdal calls ‘state-in-society’ arrangements, where governance emerges not solely from top-down institutions but through negotiated power relations within a fragmented landscape.⁴⁰

³⁹ Harry Hobbs & George Williams, ‘Micronations: A lacuna in the law’ (2021) *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, Vol. 19 (1), 71, 97.

⁴⁰ Joel S. Migdal, ‘The question of authority’ (2020) *Journal of Chinese Governance*, Vol. 6 (3), 333, 350.

These hybrid configurations pose critical questions for any two-state solution. Can a Palestinian state emerge from such fractured foundations, or does the consolidation of hybrid forms of authority reinforce the status quo? The coexistence of two rival political systems highlights the internal governance challenges that would accompany any future state-building project. Moreover, understanding the Palestinian territories as governed by hybrid political orders forces policymakers and analysts to move beyond binary categories of sovereignty and recognize the layered, uneven realities on the ground.

3. Renewed Diplomatic Efforts and the Legacy of Annapolis

In July 2007 a major diplomatic breakthrough was achieved, mainly due to the perseverance of President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in pursuing a peace agreement. Bush repeatedly emphasised the need for Israel to end the expansion of settlements in the Palestinian territories, thereby compromising the territorial continuity of a future Palestinian State. Moreover, for the US administration, it was necessary to guarantee the security of the State of Israel.⁴¹

Israel, partly sceptical, agreed to take part in this initiative mainly because al-Fatah had clearly distanced itself from Hamas after the clashes in 2007. This alignment finally enabled dialogue between Israel and the Abbas-led NPA.

The Israeli Prime Minister and the leader of the NPC met several times before the summit to draw up a real ‘declaration of principles’ to be presented at Annapolis. The result of these meetings was the drafting of a text containing the six key points that would form the basis of any future negotiations.⁴²

⁴¹ Thomas G. Fraser, *The Arab-Israeli conflict (Il conflitto arabo-israeliano)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015), 109.

⁴² Osvaldo Baldacci, Antonio Picasso & Alberto Simoni, Senato della Repubblica, *The peace process in the Middle East after the Annapolis Conference (Il processo di pace in Medio Oriente dopo la conferenza di Annapolis)* (2008), available at https://www.senato.it/application/xmanager/projects/leg16/attachments/dossier/file_internets/000/006/942/86_20per_20sito.pdf.

The document, therefore, looked like this:

1. Creation of a Palestinian State: the Palestinians demanded the creation of a State in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, territories where Israel claimed control of the borders and demanded the demilitarisation of the territories;
2. Borders between Israel and the Palestinian territories: the Palestinians claimed a homogeneous Palestinian State within the pre-1967 borders, a claim categorically rejected by the Israelis;
3. Status of Jerusalem: the Palestinians claimed sovereignty over East Jerusalem, conquered by the Israelis following the Six Day War. Israel's opinion on this decision was conflicting, ranging from that of Deputy Prime Minister Haim Ramon, who was ready to negotiate on the division of the city, to strong internal opposition.
4. Situation of the Palestinian refugees: while the Palestinians have been asking to return to their homes since 1948, Israel, by not allowing it, demands that the Palestinians recognise Israel as the State of the Jewish people. This recognition, in turn, would not allow the Palestinians to claim their 'right of return';
5. Israeli settlements in the West Bank: the need to limit and eliminate them was reiterated, as it was impossible to build a Palestinian State while being interrupted by Israeli settlements. In spite of the settlers' opposition, there was a hint of a possible willingness on the part of the Israelis to make territorial concessions in exchange for maintaining the most important settlements;
6. Water resources: while Israel claims control of most of the water resources in the West Bank, the Palestinians appeal for a fairer division.⁴³

It was with this declaration of principles that the fateful Annapolis summit took place on 27-28 November 2007 in the United States. The conference was attended by representatives from Israel, the PNA and some forty countries, including several Arab nations such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan.

⁴³ Ibidem.

The main objective was to relaunch the peace process and lay the foundations for the creation of two states, following in the footsteps of the ‘Roadmap for Peace’, a plan proposed in 2003 by the Middle East Quartet formed in 2002 and consisting of the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and Russia, which took part in the summit itself. The summit ended with the so-called ‘joint agreement’ (Annapolis Joint Understanding) read by Bush on 27 November.⁴⁴ This was basically a commitment made by Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Olmert, who were to reach an agreement by the end of 2008.⁴⁵

A peculiar feature of this process was that, during the entire negotiation phase, no formal agreement was ever signed: probably the aim was to proceed cautiously, avoiding generating false hopes that would probably remain unfulfilled.⁴⁶

However, despite initial expectations, the Annapolis process did not achieve the long-awaited results due to numerous obstacles like the lack of mutual trust, but also the continued expansion of Israeli settlements and the internal divisions within the Palestinian front between Hamas and the PNA. Once again, the hope of reaching an agreement vanished altogether, despite the emotional and mediatic impact of the process, involving many Arab countries and generating real expectations in the international community.

Another diplomatic initiative was the 19 June 2008 agreement, reached between Hamas and Tel Aviv thanks to Egyptian mediation. The understanding envisaged a mutual cease-fire that was to last about six months: while Hamas undertook not to launch rockets on Israel, the latter was to undertake to progressively reduce the

⁴⁴ The White House, *Joint Understanding Read by President Bush at Annapolis Conference. US, Israeli and Palestinian governments* (2007), available at <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/11/20071127.html>.

⁴⁵ Center for Israel Education, *Joint Understanding Signed at Annapolis Conference* (2007), available at <https://israeled.org/joint-understanding-signed-at-anapolis-conference/>.

⁴⁶ Amira Schiff, ‘The “Annapolis Process”: a chronology of failure’ (2013) *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 19 (4), 660, 678;

Chatham House, *Israeli–Palestinian Peacemaking* (2024), available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/07/israeli-palestinian-peacemaking/abbas-and-olmert-annapolis-and-after>.

blockade on Gaza, allowing the passage of humanitarian aid and necessities. This agreement had a far deeper value than what one might attribute to it at a first reading: for the first time, Hamas was recognised by Israel, and this was evidenced by the formalisation of an agreement between the parties.

4. Israel's concerns

When Netanyahu returned to power in 2009, he quickly set about reformulating the agenda of the new Israeli government. Under his leadership, the right-wing government's policies aimed at expanding the settlements already present in the West Bank, an approach considered necessary to maintain and guarantee the security and identity of the State of Israel.⁴⁷ In addition, the new agenda also included the need to conclude an agreement with the Palestinians.

Obama placed his trust in the Israeli leadership, but his hopes were dashed on 18 May 2009, the day the US President met with Netanyahu at the White House; while Obama continued to reiterate the need for a two-state solution, putting an end to settlements, the Israeli premier made any peace conditional on the Palestinians' recognition of Israel as an entirely Jewish State.⁴⁸ The new leader had no intention of reaching a two-state solution: his only goal was to reach an agreement.

In the following months, progress was made by both sides, Palestinians and Israelis, who prepared to make small concessions to the other side during public speeches. However, it had to wait until September for Obama, Clinton, and Mitchell to meet with Netanyahu and Abbas in New York. Even though Obama had reiterated the problem of the steadily growing settlements, at first the Palestinians failed to make this issue a priority for a future resumption of negotiations. On 25 November, Netanyahu announced the start of a ten-month suspension of construction in most Israeli settlements located in the West Bank; however, the Palestinians considered the

⁴⁷ Ronen Hoffman, 'Israel's foreign policy under Benjamin Netanyahu' (2019) *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Vol. 18, 4, 5.

⁴⁸ Eytan Gilboa, 'Obama and Israel: A Preliminary Assessment' (2009) *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 3 (3), 51, 58.

moratorium insufficient, as it did not include settlements in East Jerusalem, the territory most disputed between the parties.⁴⁹

Another problem that caused the stalemate in negotiations was the blockade that Israel had imposed on Gaza in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead, strictly controlling goods entering through the borders.⁵⁰ Officially, this blockade was motivated by the need to prevent the passage of materials that could be used for military purposes. Many materials that were classified as military, such as cement or steel, were at the same time essential for the reconstruction of the infrastructure destroyed during the 2008 operation. The consequence of this blockade was a serious slowdown in reconstruction in Gaza, which was eased by the Israeli government only gradually in time.

In summary, the New York summit launched in September 2009 did not lead to concrete results in the short term. Although there was a real willingness to negotiate and mediate between the parties on the part of the US summit, the deep differences between Israel and the NPA kept hindering any real progress.

The following years saw no improvement in the situation: in 2019 Netanyahu announced that he wanted to annex some significant territories in the West Bank, an announcement that, in conjunction with Washington's declaration of the legitimacy of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, triggered protests among segments of the Palestinian population frustrated by political stagnation and territorial losses. Throughout the year, attacks and clashes continued between Israeli militias and Palestinian militants along the Gaza Strip: although no real war was taking place, armed confrontations were increasingly frequent.

In 2020, two events worsened the already precarious situation of the Palestinian people. Starting with Peace to Prosperity, the 'agreement of the century' presented by President Donald Trump on 28 January 2020 to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and

⁴⁹ Barak Ravid, Haaretz, *Netanyahu Declares 10-month Settlement Freeze 'To Restart Peace Talks'* (2009), available at <https://www.haaretz.com/2009-11-25/ty-article/netanyahu-declares-10-month-settlement-freeze-to-restart-peace-talks/0000017f-e1ff-d7b2-a77f-e3ff98e90000>.

⁵⁰ Scott C. Farquhar, *Back to Basics: A Study of the Second Lebanon War and Operation CAST LEAD* (Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2009), 97, 99.

the ambassadors of Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. The final document of the agreement, consisting of 181 pages, contained very precise indications about the future of the State of Israel. First of all, it stated that Israel should keep Jerusalem as its capital, while the Palestinians' capital would basically be the city periphery; furthermore, the State that was to be built for the Palestinians would have to be demilitarised and the Palestinians themselves would not be allowed to control the borders; the Israelis would be allowed to keep the settlements in the West Bank, even annexing a large fertile area of it. The final agreement was to be negotiated within four years.⁵¹

The plan, which was strongly criticised, openly sided with the Israeli people, even destroying the position, maintained for years by the United States, regarding the two-state solution. Indeed, the categorical rejection of the agreement by the Palestinians, who considered the plan itself a legitimisation of the Israeli occupation, was not surprising, nor was Israel's support for Trump's proposal. Nevertheless, with the end of the Trump administration in 2021 and the inauguration of successor Joe Biden, the plan was shelved.⁵²

Another challenge to the two-state solution lies in Netanyahu's agenda, which has implemented policy shifts that have drawn criticism from both national and international observers: first, he legalised nine Israeli colonies in the West Bank and gave his approval for the construction of more of them; in addition to these developments, further tensions arose following parliamentary approval of a law according to which citizenship would be revoked from those convicted of terrorism or anyone receiving funding from the PNA.⁵³

⁵¹ Salam Fayyad, Brookings, *Trump's Middle East peace plan: What's there to be upset about?* (2020), available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/trumps-middle-east-peace-plan-whats-there-to-be-upset-about/>.

⁵² James F. Jeffrey, Wilson Center, *The Abraham Accords: A Three-Year Success Now at a Crossroads* (2023), available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/abraham-accords-three-year-success-now-crossroads>.

⁵³ ISPI, *Israel-Palestine Escalation: 12 graphs to understand how we got here (Escalation Israele-Palestina: 12 grafici per capire come siamo arrivati fin qui)* (2023), available at

So, as we can see, on the Israeli side pressure from extremist groups opposes the creation of a Palestinian State recognised by the international community, citing national security concerns as a central argument; however, this consideration is not unequivocal, as has been pointed out from the words of the current opposition leader and former Israeli Prime Minister, Yair Lapid, who emphasised the importance of guaranteeing both Israel's security and the creation of a stable and peaceful environment for the two nations. On 22 September 2022, Lapid said in his first address to the UN General Assembly that 'Despite all the obstacles... a large majority of Israelis support the vision of this two-State solution. I am one of them'.⁵⁴

5. The Impact of October 7 and the Gaza War on the Two-State Solution

The October 7, 2023, attacks by Hamas and the subsequent Israeli military campaign in Gaza have dramatically transformed the context in which any discussion of a two-state solution must now take place. What had already become a diplomatically stagnant and practically fragmented political framework has, in the wake of this unprecedented escalation, been further destabilized. The intensity and severity of the violence, the humanitarian consequences, and the political shifts it has induced have made the already remote prospects of two states existing side by side appear more implausible than ever before.

As we know, the Hamas offensive on October 7, involving a coordinated land, air, and sea assault from the Gaza Strip, resulted in the deaths of approximately 1,100 Israelis and the abduction of over 200 individuals. It was the deadliest day in Israel's history and marked a massive failure of the Israeli security apparatus, leading to an immediate and overwhelming response from the Netanyahu government. In retaliation, Israel launched a full-scale military campaign in Gaza, resulting in the deaths of more

<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/escalation-israele-palestina-12-grafici-per-capire-come-siamo-arrivati-fin-qui-126406>.

⁵⁴ United Nations News, *Israeli Prime Minister Lapid backs two-State solution* (2022), available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1127551>.

than 52,000 Palestinians, many of them civilians, and the displacement of over 80% of the enclave's population.⁵⁵

The scale and duration of the Israeli operation have had several far-reaching consequences for the political environment surrounding the two-state debate. Within Israel, public opinion has shifted decisively to the right.⁵⁶ Support for further negotiations with the Palestinians has dropped significantly, and political discourse has moved toward concepts of permanent security control rather than partition. The trauma of October 7 has reinforced longstanding fears within Israeli society that a sovereign Palestinian state, particularly in Gaza, would pose an intolerable security risk. The far-right elements of the Israeli government, already influential before the attacks, have gained further traction, openly opposing the idea of any Palestinian self-determination. Prime Minister Netanyahu has explicitly rejected the establishment of a Palestinian state in recent public statements, positioning the Israeli government in direct opposition to U.S. and EU diplomatic calls for a two-state revival.⁵⁷

On the Palestinian side, the war has exposed the limits and contradictions of both major political factions. Hamas's actions, though celebrated by some as resistance, have been widely condemned for targeting civilians, and its governance capabilities in Gaza are now severely impaired, if not altogether dismantled. Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority, appears increasingly irrelevant. Its inability to influence events in Gaza, protect civilians, or assert a unified political vision has further eroded its already fragile legitimacy. According to the Middle East Council on Global Affairs analyst Omar Rahman, the PA faces a deep credibility crisis, both domestically and internationally,

⁵⁵ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Reported impact snapshot | Gaza Strip* (2025), available at <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/reported-impact-snapshot-gaza-strip-8-april-2025>.

⁵⁶ Neil Bar, *Iron Swords and Ancient Echoes: Ancient Jewish History in the Israeli Far-Right Rhetoric for Unity After October 7* (2025) Nations and Nationalism.

⁵⁷ Middle East Monitor, *Netanyahu attacks Palestinian right to establish a state* (2025), available at <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250428-netanyahu-attacks-palestinian-right-to-establish-a-state/>.

which severely undermines its capacity to act as a prospective partner in renewed peace efforts.⁵⁸

Furthermore, the humanitarian devastation caused by the Israeli bombardment has shifted the moral and political narrative globally. While Western governments initially backed Israel's right to self-defense, increasing international scrutiny, from UN agencies, human rights organizations, and parts of the Global South, has highlighted the disproportionality of Israel's response. The war has reignited global solidarity movements for Palestinians but also entrenched divisions within Western foreign policy establishments. The inability of international actors to stop the violence or propose credible political alternatives has further delegitimized the idea that a diplomatic resolution, particularly the two-state model, is within reach.

Strategically, the war has also recalibrated regional dynamics. Countries that had recently normalized ties with Israel under the Abraham Accords, such as the UAE and Bahrain, have adopted a more cautious tone, while Jordan and Egypt face intense domestic pressure due to the war's fallout. Meanwhile, Iran's influence in Gaza and Lebanon has gained prominence, complicating any future US-led peace initiative.⁵⁹

From a theoretical standpoint, the war reveals the inadequacy of assuming that territorial partition alone can address the root causes of the conflict. The mutual distrust, ontological insecurity, and fragmentation of political leadership make it difficult to envisage the emergence of two coherent, cooperative states. The asymmetry in military power, diplomatic leverage, and territorial control continues to tilt the political equation overwhelmingly in Israel's favour. In this environment, the two-state solution risks

⁵⁸ Omar Rahman, 'Amidst Unprecedented Threats, Palestinians Face Crisis of Leadership', in ISPI *Conflict and Change in the Mena Region Geopolitics and Geoeconomics* (2024), Mediterranean Dialogues, available at <https://www.ispionline.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/DOSSIER-ISPI-2024-Conflict-and-Change-in-MENA-Region.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Amr Hamzawy, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Ending the New Wars of Attrition: Opportunities for Collective Regional Security in the Middle East* (2025), available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/03/ending-the-new-wars-of-attrition-opportunities-for-collective-regional-security-in-the-middle-east?lang=en>.

becoming an obsolete paradigm, maintained rhetorically but hollow in substance, as Lustick warned.

The Gaza war has not only postponed the possibility of a two-state solution, but it has also exposed the systemic dysfunction of that framework in its current form. Any genuine revival would require a radical rethinking of the political architecture, a restoration of Palestinian political unity, and unprecedented international pressure and guarantees. At present, however, the war has amplified instability, deepened trauma on both sides, and entrenched leadership structures that appear hostile or incapable of returning to a meaningful peace process.

6. Conclusions

This paper has offered a comprehensive analysis of the ongoing challenges and shifting dynamics surrounding the feasibility of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Drawing on theoretical insights, the study has demonstrated that the prospects for the creation of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel have become increasingly constrained by both structural conditions and recent developments on the ground.

Among the major impediments, the continued expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank has significantly eroded the territorial basis for partition. The fragmentation of Palestinian governance, exemplified by the division between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza, has further undermined the coherence and legitimacy of Palestinian political leadership. Additionally, the evolution of hybrid governance structures within both territories reflects the complexity of state formation under occupation and siege, challenging classical definitions of sovereignty and control.

The paper also explored alternative perspectives, including the growing academic and political discourse regarding one-state solution. While the two-state framework continues to receive international endorsement, particularly from Western and UN institutions, its disconnection from present realities raises serious concerns about its viability as a roadmap for peace. The theoretical and historical review of the

conflict has underscored that any solution must account not only for physical borders but also for deeper issues of identity, historical injustice, and asymmetrical power relations.

The events of October 7, 2023, and the devastating Gaza war that followed represent a turning point. The attack by Hamas and Israel's prolonged military campaign have intensified distrust, widened political polarization, and decimated the material and institutional conditions necessary for negotiations. The war has also altered international perceptions and priorities, reinforcing Israeli security narratives while simultaneously reviving calls for justice and accountability for Palestinian civilians. It is evident that, in the aftermath of such violence, the space for a negotiated two-state outcome has narrowed further, both politically and psychologically.

Considering these findings, the two-state solution seems not only elusive but increasingly symbolic: an idea maintained more as a diplomatic placeholder than a realistic strategy. Nevertheless, its conceptual strength persists in international discourse as the only framework that promises national self-determination for both peoples. If the two-state solution is to regain credibility, it would require unprecedented shifts: renewed Palestinian political unity, a strategic recalibration within Israeli society, and sustained, balanced international pressure capable of altering the incentive structures of both leaderships.

Absent these conditions, any peace initiative risks reproducing the very patterns that have perpetuated the conflict. As this paper has argued, the question is no longer solely whether a two-state solution is desirable, but whether it remains structurally possible, and what alternatives the current trajectory might compel the international community and the parties themselves to consider.

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