A.B. Yehoshua, You're Deluded: The Two-state Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Remains Viable

Despite what A.B. Yehoshua believes, and what Naftali Bennett wants us to believe, the settlement enterprise has not made two states for two peoples impossible.

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If there is a sure sign that the Zeitgeist prevailing in Israel today is one of messianism, imperviousness and detachment, it’s the triumph of fantasy over reality. There is no doubt here that a resolution can be achieved regardless of the situation on the battlefield and that psychological warfare can result in the desired outcome, even if the actual reality shows quite the opposite picture. But contrary to the spirit of the time, a battle is an event limited to a specific place and time, while the Zeitgeist is ongoing and open to interpretation.

It is hard to understand A.B. Yehoshua’s recent about-face, in which he chose to hoist a white flag on behalf of the two-state solution. [Yehoshua calls on Israel to grant residency to some 100,000 Palestinians living in Area C of the West Bank but denies that this is annexation.] In his distress, he has turned to solutions that are completely divorced from the history of the conflict, and from the demographic and physical realities in the West Bank.

If, for example, Yehoshua were to take a drive from the Etzion Bloc (south of Jerusalem) to the southern Hebron Hills, he would discover that his car is one of the very few sporting Israeli license plates in a long convoy of Palestinian vehicles, and that he is being protected by Israel Defense Forces patrols and concrete barriers by the roadside. He would also learn that there is only one Jewish community in this area with a population of more than 5,000 (Kiryat Arba), and it is embedded in the midst of the Hebron district where some 750,000 Palestinians live. At this point, he would not dare say that the demographic and physical dominance of the Palestinians is “threatened” by the (Jewish) regional council in the southern Hebron Hills, whose population only numbers some 8,410 souls.

Alternatively, if he were to travel to northern Samaria and pass through the West Bank separation barrier at the Reihan crossing, Yehoshua would discover that the Israeli presence there amounts to two small communities – Mevo Dotan and Hermesh – where a grand total of 718 Israelis live, fueled by the Amana movement and exceptional state budgets, and protected by numerous IDF soldiers. Some 400,000 Palestinians currently live in the surrounding area, between Nablus and Jenin.

From here, Yehoshua could head to the Jordan Valley and observe along the entire route hundreds of thousands of dunams of agricultural land belonging to Palestinians, mostly planted with olive groves. He would discover that in the Arvot Hayarden Regional Council, which covers about 15 percent of the area of the West Bank, there are 22 tiny communities where a total of only 5,101 Israelis live. There has been an actual decrease in the number of Israelis living in some of these communities, with the record held by Ma’aleh Efraim, which has seen one in four residents departing over the past five years.

Then, Yehoshua could take the car southward to the Megillot Regional Council and find that in another 8 percent of the area of the West Bank, there are a mere 1,431 Israelis living in just six settlements.

**Overwhelming majority**

Yehoshua should also take a look at important data residing on official State of Israel websites. This would tell him, for example, that the Palestinians enjoy an overwhelming demographic majority of 82 percent in the West Bank. Sixty of the 126 Israeli settlements there are inhabited by fewer than 1,000 people, and only a total of 28,000 people live in all these 60 settlements combined.

In 51 additional settlements, the number of residents in each place ranges from 1,000 to 5,000 (totaling 114,000 Israelis). The 15 remaining settlements are the ones that constitute the Israeli “settlement blocs.” Together with East Jerusalem, these “blocs” cover only 4 percent of the area of the West Bank – and about 80 percent of Israelis living beyond the Green Line (Israel’s pre-1967 borders) live in them. These are the territories that are candidates for annexation to Israel in the framework of land swaps, and no one is demanding the evacuation of “450,000 settlers” (the number of settlers quoted by Yehoshua).

And here’s another important fact: About 60 percent of the Israeli workforce in the West Bank works in Israel proper, and another 25 percent works in the education system (double the average within Israel). And it transpires that the smaller and more isolated the settlement, the greater the proportion of employees working for the local council or education system – this can reach 80 percent.

In addition, the socioeconomic report published recently by the Central Bureau of Statistics indicates a socioeconomic decline in seven of the “Jewish” councils in the West Bank. Moreover, it’s important to note that the two large ultra-Orthodox cities, Betar Ilit and Modi’in Ilit – which are home to about a third of all Israelis in the West Bank – are ranked in that index’s first “cluster” i.e., they are heavily subsidized by the state.

The respirator of the settlement enterprise is these exceptional budgets. The Macro Center for Political Economics has found that in the 2017-2018 budget, each Israeli living in the West Bank will be allocated nearly four times the national average, and tens of percentage points more than a resident of the Galilee or southern Israel.

Nevertheless, in the past 20 years there has been a drastic decline in the annual growth rate of the number of settlers – from 10.4 percent to only 4 percent now. The causes of population growth have also changed considerably. Today, only a third of settler growth comes via immigration from within Israel proper to the West Bank, while two-thirds stems from birthrate (half of which is accounted for by the Haredi cities of Betar Ilit and Modi’in Ilit, which will likely be annexed to Israel in any future agreement).

Israelis do not travel on two-thirds of the roads in the West Bank. And there is no significant Israeli agriculture or industry in the West Bank, with nearly all those workers you see in the fields Palestinian.

If Yehoshua had noticed these facts, he would have understood that it is precisely an attempt to overcome the failure of the settlement enterprise that the plan to annex Area C was born, as Education Minister Naftali Bennett has himself already admitted: “The full annexation of the West Bank with the 2 million Arabs there … is not practicable and endangers the State of Israel for reasons of security, demographics and values,” he has said.

And if Yehoshua continued his West Bank tour, he would discover the extent to which Bennett’s plan is groundless from the security, diplomatic, legal and, especially, physical angles. It’s easy to discern that, contrary to what was presented in a video produced by Bennett’s Habayit Hayehudi party recently, Areas A and B in the West Bank are not contiguous blocs, spreading over 40 percent of the West Bank. Instead, they consist of no less than 169 Palestinian blocs and communities, cut off from one another by innumerable Israeli corridors and unused IDF firing zones that are together defined as Area C.

Yehoshua would then understand that, in fact, Bennett is proposing to increase the length of the Israeli border from 313 kilometers to 1,800 kilometers (194 to 1,118 miles). If he continues to believe Bennett, he will doubtless back the dismantling of the security barrier that Israel has built to the tune of 15 billion shekels ($3.9 billion), but he will have to accept that annexing Area C means Israel will have to build a barrier along the new border at the cost of 27 billion shekels and allocate another 4 billion shekels per year for maintenance purposes.

If he looked at the maps, Yehoshua would discover that 50 percent of Area C is privately owned Palestinian land, most of it agricultural, registered in the names of inhabitants in 276 Palestinian locales. Seeing this, he would realize that Israel would have to open hundreds of agricultural crossings, in accordance with the current model of the separation barrier, and that this would cost many billions of shekels.

This is the place to note that Bennett has pledged to create “a fully contiguous transportation strip for the Palestinians with a one-time investment of hundreds of millions of dollars, which will enable the Arab inhabitants to reach any point in Judea and Samaria without any checkpoints or [Israeli] soldiers.”

Finally, we must not forget that such an annexation would seal off the Palestinian Authority and require Israel to reestablish its Civil Administration, whose annual operational cost would be about 11 billion shekels.

As for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Bennett and the rest of the supporters of annexation, we have already learned that the facts and physical reality are not criteria for determining their policy. Indeed, Yehoshua is correct in noting that there is no likelihood of an agreement with the Palestinians under Netanyahu’s rule – but it is impossible to claim that the physical reality is the reason for this.

Way back in 1982, Prof. Yehoshafat Harkabi, a former Military Intelligence chief, wrote: “The danger of the national mistake was inherent in our existence as a land of vision, because the vision tries to change the reality. However, the size of the vision, which conditions its realization, is its realism, despite the fact that even though the vision aspires to rise above the reality, its feet are always planted in that reality. This is the difference between a vision and a fantasy hovering on the wings of illusion.”

The vision of the democratic Jewish state, which is the basis for the two-state solution, is more realistic – even today – than Netanyahu and Bennett’s nationalistic-messianic one-state vision. Only the two-state solution encompasses a moral vision within it. Ignoring the existing reality and its constraints, in the hope that the signs and vision will shape a different reality, is a proven recipe for deterioration and a dangerous move toward disaster.