

Peter Beinart's Wedge

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The don of liberal Zionism has come out against a two-state solution. His argument is delusional and messianic. But that's not the real problem with it.

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Palestinians trample a poster on the ground depicting the flags of Israel and the US on July 7, 2020. *MOHAMMED ABED/AFP via Getty Images.*

“Peter Beinart is brave, thoughtful, and capable of evolving views. Which is why we should read this carefully and remember that most of Peter’s critics are working off talking points that are dishonest and decades old.”—Ben Rhodes, former U.S. deputy national security advisor

Jews in America can be excused for feeling betwixt and between when it comes to their relationship with Israel. In certain proud Zionist quarters this is not the case. For religious Jews this is largely not the case. But for the average liberal American Jew—that is to say, for the average American Jew—Zionism has become an increasingly heavily laden term. The loudest voices on social media and in the newspapers of record are ever more skeptical of Israel, and it is now fairly normal to read op-eds and articles that openly accuse Israel of the greatest moral failings.

The effusive tweet quoted above, issued into the universe by the former Obama administration official Ben Rhodes, praises one such polemical essay written in this vein by the magazine editor and writer Peter Beinart. (Beinart's essay was published originally in the magazine *Jewish Currents* and then in condensed form in the *New York Times*). In it, Beinart calls for a dissolution of the Jewish state of Israel in favor of a bi-national Jewish and Arab state. Other media figures, who just a few years ago might have been reliable critics of Israeli policy in the West Bank, but just as solid defenders of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, have deemed Beinart's position a serious one. According to one media analyst, Beinart's article will "carve out some space" for the bi-national position within the Democratic Party.

Beinart's plan is not difficult to summarize. Rather than a Jewish state and a prospective Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, he calls for a new state in all of what was once British Mandatory Palestine that will serve as a "national home" for both Jews and Arabs. The country would be run jointly and in cooperation by Jewish and Arab political leaders. It would celebrate the rituals, religions, and communal aims of both peoples. The Jewish Law of Return to Israel would not be canceled—but a Palestinian Right of Return would be added. The state would be a Jewish home as well as a Palestinian home. As Beinart puts it:

Imagine a country in which, at sundown on the 27th of Nissan, the beginning of Yom HaShoah—Holocaust Remembrance Day—Jewish and Palestinian co-presidents lower a flag in Warsaw Ghetto Square at Yad Vashem as an imam delivers the Islamic *du'a* for the dead. Imagine those same leaders, on the 15th of May, gathering at a restored cemetery in the village of Deir Yassin, the site of a future Museum of the Nakba, which commemorates the roughly 750,000 Palestinians who fled or were expelled during Israel's founding, as a rabbi recites *El Malei Raḥamim*, our prayer for the dead.

A self-described "liberal Zionist," Beinart claims that the two-state solution, the long-dominant foreign-policy view about the resolution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, has failed. (This is the Beinart "evolution" that Ben Rhodes praises.) The Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's much-discussed, but perhaps now definitively delayed, plan to assert Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley—the stretch of barren, sparsely populated but strategically important land that separates the western side of the Jordan River from the country of Jordan—is for Beinart but the latest example of Israel's unseriousness about dividing the land into two states.

Because of Israel's unwillingness to make peace with the Palestinians, according to Beinart, the conditions for the two-state solution no longer obtain. And so he advocates a return to the mostly-dormant bi-national dream instead. He calls his essay and his state-to-be "Yavne," after the school of learning created in northern Israel by Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai after the destruction of the Jewish commonwealth by the Romans in 70 CE. Deliberately or not, Beinart omits the pregnant fact that the school of Yavne was created to *perpetuate the memory and ideas of the destroyed Jewish commonwealth* and not to replace it with a happily apolitical future.

This is just one of many absurdities and distortions in Beinart's essay. One may be tempted simply to dismiss it as an exercise in personal and professional self-promotion, a kind of advertisement campaign or fundraising letter for a new post-Zionist Jewish left that Beinart seemingly wishes to lead.

But the fact that Beinart's position could appeal to someone like Ben Rhodes pushes us toward deeper questions. For Ben Rhodes is no fool. More importantly, he is someone who is likely to have real power and influence over American foreign policy in the Middle East in perhaps the very near future. As deputy national security advisor under Barack Obama, Rhodes played a critical role in the 2015 JCPOA, the so-called Iran deal. The clear but unstated aim of that deal was the reorientation of the American position in the Middle East: away from the alliances with Saudi Arabia and Israel toward greater neutrality in the conflict between those countries and Iran. And who knows what role Ben Rhodes—or someone who thinks just like him—will play in a prospective Biden administration.

We are thus compelled to inquire: what kind of political work *in America* might Beinart's bi-national dream accomplish? What role might it play in foreign- and domestic-policy debates in the United States?

Its most disturbing use, I suggest, might be as a wedge between American Jews and Israel. Alas, there are already more than a few voices in America's foreign-policy establishment who think that American support for Israel is a chief cause of America's presumed inability to conduct a rational or moral policy in the Middle East. In this blinkered view, lessened American-Jewish support for Israel is often seen to be indispensable for greater American freedom of action.

Beinart's plan should be considered in terms of the role it may play in domestic debates since, as an actual plan for Israel, it bears no relationship to the facts of life not only in Israel but in the entire Middle East in 2020. This is a Middle East, after all, in which *literally every state* surrounding Israel has, within the last decade, either been pushed to the limit or else totally fractured by sectarian passions.

Bashar al-Assad still presides over an absolutely shattered Syria overrun with sectarian militias and foreign armies—and with which Israel shares a border. Lebanon, ruled in large measure by the Iranian-proxy Hizballah, is a seriously debilitated land where, in recent days, banks have sometimes not been able to dispense cash from cash machines. In Jordan, the Hashemites appear to be hanging on, but for how long will they manage? In light of the chaos elsewhere, post-“Arab Spring” Egypt, ruled by General Sisi, has tried to stay away from Middle East affairs and develop a more “Africanist” political orientation. Saudi Arabia faces a catastrophic drop in oil prices, growing hostility from Washington, and seems eager to involve itself in regional proxy wars. Iran tries to extend its influence regionally even as domestic misery increases.

This is the regional atmosphere into which Peter Beinart's peaceful bi-national Jewish and Arab state is supposed to come into being. In order to dream it, Beinart has had to omit completely any geopolitical considerations. Tellingly, his essay says nothing about how regional or great powers might respond to the creation of such a state.

So let us imagine a bi-national state along with Peter Beinart—only, one that bears a closer resemblance to other countries in the region, like Lebanon and Syria. Let us imagine that a bi-national state appeared tomorrow, a state whose territory extended over the current state of Israel, Gaza, and West Bank lands currently controlled by the Palestinian authority. What would that state look like?

Sensing an opportunity to “divide and conquer,” surrounding powers would dramatically ramp up what they already do: bribery and influence-seeking in order to cultivate leaders or groups who might better suit their purposes. This is already the trend today, and is arrested only by the efforts of the IDF seeking to limit regional Arab influences in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza.

Absent Israel’s current policy, arms and money would flow from Iran and the Gulf in a bidding war for the loyalties of the Palestinian factions of the new bi-national state, fueling internal violence and gangsterism. Far from empowering moderates, Palestinian politics would be radicalized and torn up by Iranian and foreign Sunni influences. The Gulf states would seek clients to destabilize Syria and Lebanon. Iran would stir the pot in an effort to topple the Hashemites in Jordan. Israel has been at peace with Jordan since 1994, but, in this imagined arrangement, the borderlands with Jordan, home to millions of Palestinians, would immediately become an arena of power-struggle and conflict. The fall of the Jordanian kingdom could not be excluded. And what would be the fate of Arab Christians, whose fate has worsened everywhere in the Middle East—including in Gaza and the Palestinian-controlled areas of the West Bank—except in Israel?

Meanwhile, confronted with the rising balkanization and violence of intra-Palestinian politics, there would be a risk that a vicious form of ethno-nationalism would emerge among the Jews of this new entity. Today, no serious person in Israel seeks a true, violent separation from the Arabs. In this imagined state, the desire to “transfer” the Arabs out of the state would become a mainstream position as the violence and community conflicts among Palestinian factions increased. Ambition and prospects for money and weapons from abroad would drive more Palestinian terrorism. Moderates on both sides would give up and choose emigration. There would be every incentive for violence and civil war.

Ben Rhodes, we saw, has praised Beinart’s essay for breaking new ground, going past the stale “talking points” of the two-state solution to the conflict. In fact, Beinart’s view of a happy, pluralistic unified country in the heart of the Middle East appears to have been unearthed from a time capsule buried in 1991. After the cold war, many Israelis and Americans did in fact dream of a happy future of economic union, declining religious extremism, and technological solutions to problems between Israelis and Arabs—as had been accomplished largely in Europe by the end of the great game of the cold war. Sadly, the Middle East of 2020 is farther away from that vision than ever. And not only the Middle East. One might very well ask Peter Beinart how his plan for a transformative regime change in Israel toward what he sees as happy pluralism and liberalism can be squared with the fate of pluralism and liberalism in countries with long experience with these ideas.

“Yavne,” then, is a fantasy rather than a political plan. But it is a fantasy with some antecedents. As Beinart emphasizes, the plan does even have some Jewish intellectual progenitors, and Beinart cites figures from the middle of the 20th century—such as Judah Magnes and Martin Buber—who before Israel’s founding in 1948 advocated for a bi-national Jewish state rather than the partition of the land into independent Jewish and Arab states. But Beinart’s position ultimately differs from theirs: it is at once much more and much less. Buber and Magnes expressed a view of Judaism holding that the “religion of the book” must be separated from the sometimes violent realities of politics. Taking Judaism away from the realm of the mind into the realm of realpolitik would inevitably corrupt it, according to Buber, Magnes and other figures.

This is not a view of politics or Judaism that I share—it claims that politics can be escaped, and politics are inescapable—but it is at least a well-developed position. In contrast, for Beinart, politics can bring salvation and peace: his imagined state will bring peace between the two (or more) communities and establish harmony between their various political and religious aims. It is, in short, a position of secular messianism. It is not a small irony that the main contemporary standard bearers for his policy proposal of a binational state are a strange subset of Satmar Jews, who also believe that Israel should not exist as it is an affront to their *religious* messianic vision.

Ben Rhodes, and other foreign-policy hands of his ilk, are neither secular messianists nor followers of Martin Buber. Were he actually to think about it, Rhodes would likely be under no illusion that a happy bi-national state might be created in Israel, and he surely would not advocate the unhappy version. Why, then, could Beinart's position gain followers and supporters among current and prospective decision-makers in American foreign policy—all of whom know better?

The answer is that, just below the surface, Beinart's article is not actually about Israel at all. It is about America, and in particular about the real and imagined role of the Jews in American political life at a very difficult moment.

For more than a decade now, increasing numbers of voices in the American foreign-policy establishment, whether on the "realist right" (say, the foreign-policy scholar John Mearsheimer), the "technocratic center left" (say, Ben Rhodes), or the "far left" (pick one of dozens of new online publications or podcasts or popular young Congresspeople) have been crying foul about America's ostensibly too cozy relationship with Israel. The America-Israel alliance, according to these voices, damages America's strategic interests and even its morality.

On the merits, the argument is simply untenable. Israel has been a useful and, at times, a vital ally for the United States. Israel's record of upholding liberality and fairness for all of its citizens is not perfect, but it remains praiseworthy given the realities of the region and the campaigns of violence and terror to which it is regularly subjected. The strategic rationale of America's alliance with Israel is simple: Israel has the most competent military and is the most reliable partner in the region. The moral rationale is simple, too: Israel is the most just and least oppressive state in the region.

And yet a certain segment of elite opinion in the United States continues to argue that American support for Israel prevents the United States from pursuing what it imagines to be a more rational foreign policy in the Middle East—one in which America largely extricates itself from the region and makes appeasing gestures to Iran in the process. According to this line of thinking, then, pro-Israel opinion in the United States could appear to be a significant nuisance obstructing an allegedly more rational American foreign policy.

This is where the bi-national state of Peter Beinart could serve a useful function. If it becomes a mainstream position, then it will put Israel's supporters—and especially American Jews—in an impossible situation. For who could possibly oppose the creation of a happy, pluralistic, "liberal" nation? The fact that it is unrealistic and unattainable is irrelevant. The mainstreaming of the idea of a "bi-national" state would likely force Jewish supporters of Israel into this choice: either, in this view, you are for liberalism, pluralism, morality—everything

that is good in the world. Or you are—the argument continues—for racism, apartheid, and cultural genocide. No longer could the Jews take refuge in the allegedly “happy illusion” of a two-state solution down the road which, in the view of the advocates of a bi-national state, merely allows the Jews to retain their liberal credo while turning a blind eye to alleged Israeli injustice. If such a view were to become the American orthodoxy, liberal Jews would either have to criticize Israel unjustly or, more realistically, stay quiet and stay out of foreign-policy discourse.

It cannot be emphasized enough, then, that Beinart’s bi-national solution is less about Israel than it is about changing the Middle East debate in the United States. On Beinart’s own terms, it is politicized messianism without the depth and apolitical spiritual vision of other messianic conceptions. But for a perhaps growing part of the foreign-policy establishment of the United States, it could well find its use as an argument to justify selling out Israel—and at a low price. Flirting with the possibility of using American Jews as a wedge or pawns in that effort would be just lamentable collateral damage.

To be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with wanting to re-evaluate American Middle East policy. I am not an American, and I try my best to stay out of American foreign-policy debates. Yet I certainly see the need to contemplate—and openly debate—dramatic changes. Despite (or because of) all of the ideological signaling and online recrimination, America currently has *too little* informed foreign-policy debate, not too much.

“Yavne,” however, cannot possibly be considered as any kind of informed contribution to the Middle East. It is a utopian vision that belongs among the other fever dreams of Americans in the post-cold-war era. But what is truly alarming is seeing this argument adopted and enthusiastically supported by foreign-policy actors who by no means could take its proposal at face value. And this raises the prospect that its argument could be used in support of other, more dangerous ends.