

Shenhav, Yehouda, *Beyond the Two State Solution: A Jewish Political Essay*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2012

Since the early 1990s, support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become mainstream in Israel and is official policy in the Palestinian authority and Western states. Of course, what this two-state solution actually means varies widely, from the complete renunciation of any kind of Israeli control over the West Bank and Gaza and the creation of a Palestinian state with control over its defence and borders and a shared Jerusalem as its capital, to a limited Palestinian polity confined to non-continuous areas of the West Bank. In any case the possibility of any kind of two-state solution coming about is, at the moment, quite modest. No major settlements have been evacuated in the West Bank and there is little political will in Israel to do so in the short term, let alone consider sharing Jerusalem. The kind of limited state that Prime Minister Netanyahu appears to advocate is unacceptable to even the most moderate Palestinian leaders, and Hamas is unlikely to be content with even the broadest kind of two-state solution.

Fierce debates over who is responsible for the lack of progress towards a two-state solution will continue long into the future. In this context, it is unsurprising that voices criticising the very concept of the two-state solution are becoming louder. In his new book, Yehouda Shenhav, professor of sociology at Tel Aviv University, argues that the two-state solution was fatally flawed to begin with. While there is nothing particularly new about this critique, Shenhav does offer a novel way of thinking 'beyond' the current impasse.

Shenhav's main focus is on the liberal Zionists who have been the two-state solution's most vociferous proponents. For them, the key date in Israel's history is 1967. The aftermath of the Six Day War was the point where the Zionist project went wrong in refusing to relinquish control and then settling the occupied territories beyond the 'green line'. While Shenhav agrees that the occupation has been disastrous, his problem with the focus on 1967 and the green line is that it obscures the problematic situation within 'Israel proper'. Liberal Zionists want to end the occupation not just because the occupation was wrong, but also to cement a sustainable Jewish majority in non-occupied Israel. In insisting upon Jewish domination of Israel, Shenhav argues that liberal Zionism still supports a fundamentally discriminatory and oppressive form of statehood.

*Beyond The Two State Solution* argues that while 1967 is the key date for liberal Zionists, 1948 is the key date in the conflict as a whole. The legacy of 1948 and the expulsion of much of the Arab population and/or the prevention of the return of those who had fled, is what burns in the mind of Palestinians. For them, making right the legacy of 1967 is not enough and can never be

enough if there is no right of return for those who left in 1948. Moreover, Shenhav points out the many ways, official and non-official, in which Palestinian citizens of Israel have been subject to discrimination within the green line even before 1967.

Shenhav's critique of the Zionist project, at least in its post-1948 form, is hardly unprecedented, and it is unlikely to convince those who have rejected such arguments previously. What makes his book interesting though is what he does with his critique. His argument seems to push him towards the kind of 'one-state solution', in which Palestinians would be permitted to return to a state for all its citizens 'between the river and the sea', which is gaining ground with many Western intellectuals. But Shenhav isn't trying to destroy the Jewish state in the name of Palestinian liberation. Unlike most 'one-staters' and advocates of the Palestinian right of return he recognises that one cannot correct a previous injustice with another injustice. While the Palestinian right of return needs to be recognised if there is to be any real solution to the conflict, Shenhav is explicit that returnees cannot and should not turf Israelis out of their homes, and in any case most of the pre-1948 Palestinian villages have long been destroyed and built over. He goes further and extends this argument to the West Bank. The half a million settlers cannot be evacuated, nor should they be. Shenhav recognises that the settlement enterprise was actually liberating for those Jews outside the Ashkenazi Israel elite. He also points to some religious and secular settler leaders who have acknowledged the need to live alongside, rather than dominate, their Palestinian neighbours.

A true solution for Shenhav would be one in which Jews and Palestinians could live anywhere within Israel and the occupied territories. However, this would not be a one-state solution as conventionally envisaged, but a new kind of polity predicated on a new kind of sovereignty: 'one that is not based on one rigid, linear and continuous borderline. It is fragmented, scattered and not continuous' (149). Both Jewish and Palestinian rights would be protected in a new kind of constitutional arrangement. Shenhav is vague about what this kind of state would look like; it would seem to resemble a patchwork of self-governing areas within some kind of overarching constitutional structure.

Shenhav admits his project is utopian. It relies on a totally new kind of coalition in Israel to bring about peace: 'A new, reformist, Israeli politics will be operated by a coalition of left- and right-wing democrats – Arabs and Jews – who believe in sharing a single space rather than in the futile two-state solution' (148–149).

It is hard to imagine this kind of coalition forming any time soon. Further, the book does not really engage in Palestinian politics. I doubt that most Palestinians really want to share sovereignty or continue with undismantled settlements looming over their major population centres.