



By: *Harvey Morris*

Could ideas for an Israeli-Palestinian confederation salvage the fading two-state solution?



Government leaders and former diplomats in the UK and France have warned that Israel's latest settlement project in the Palestinian West Bank could extinguish the last hope for a two-state solution in the Middle East.

In a **joint statement** this month, British Prime Minister Andy Burnham was among more than a dozen European and other government leaders to condemn Israel's go-ahead for its long-deferred E1 plan that would provide an additional 1,200 Jewish settler homes in the occupied territory.

The statement said the project would undermine the prospect of a two-state solution by driving a wedge through the West Bank at a time of already unprecedented levels of violence by settlers against civilians in the territory.

Similar sentiments were echoed even more forcefully in a subsequent open letter addressed to Burnham and France's President Emmanuel Macron by more than 100 former **British and French diplomats**.

The signatories accused Israel of ethnic cleansing in the West Bank as it sought to destroy any prospect of an independent Palestinian state.

The letter, which highlighted the UK and France's historic responsibility in the region as architects of the modern Middle East, came almost a year after London and Paris formally **recognised a Palestinian state**.

Peace activists have complained that recognition remains largely a symbolic gesture in the face of an Israeli government that rejects the concept of an independent Palestinian state.

A radical version of a two-state solution

Others on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide have urged that the Europeans should take a more proactive stance by promoting a

radical version of a two-state solution: the future establishment of a confederation between independent Israeli and Palestinian states.

The confederation plan has been around for more than a decade, promoted by former politicians, diplomats and academics on both sides and sustained by organisations such as **A Land for All**, a joint Israeli-Palestinian initiative that recognises that the two communities have a long-standing attachment to the same narrow stretch of land between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea.

Where other peace strategies, including last century's **Oslo Accords**, were based on the physical separation of Israelis and Palestinians, the confederalists argue for a structure that would allow for freedom of movement and residence, and enable cooperation on issues such as the economy and security.

International supporters called on the European Union to endorse urgently a confederation of the states of Israel and Palestine in one homeland

Israeli and Palestinian promoters of the plan are among a small minority of their co-nationals who have managed to maintain a dialogue since the Hamas-led assault on Israel in October 2023 and Israel's devastating military response in Gaza.

In April last year, more than 120 of their international supporters, including French economist Thomas Piketty and American historian Kenneth Pomeranz, called on the European Union to endorse urgently a confederation of the states of Israel and Palestine in one homeland.

The signatories to the **appeal**, published in *Le Monde*, argued that a confederation was the only realistic foundation for long-term security, economic development, welfare, and environmental sustainability for both Israelis and Palestinians.

The confederal model

The confederal model is based loosely on the example of the European Union and other historic partnerships between neighbouring independent communities.

Israel and a future sovereign Palestinian state would have defined borders, while citizens of both would have the right to travel freely, and to live and work in the territory of their neighbour, as long as they accepted its sovereignty and laws.

The two states would cooperate on security, while the rights of the citizens of both would be protected by a court of human rights

Israelis and Palestinians would retain their nationality wherever they lived in the confederation, voting in their own national elections but choosing local candidates at the municipal level.

The arrangement would allow Israeli citizens, including those now classed as settlers, to remain in what would become Palestinian territory in the West Bank. Palestinians would be free to pursue work and other opportunities in Israel. A common economic zone would target the existing economic inequality between Israelis and Palestinians.

The two states would cooperate on security, while the rights of the citizens of both would be protected by a court of human rights.

A Holy Land Confederation

Partisans of a confederation regard it as a last chance to preserve Israeli democracy while fulfilling Palestinian aspirations.

A confederation would require Israel to abandon the concept of “*hafrada*” or separation which maintains that hard borders are required to protect its citizens. “Good

fences make good neighbours,” as former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak once said.

The confederation idea sounds like a utopian pipe dream in the current climate of violence and distrust. But so too does any outcome that involves the creation of a Palestinian state, which the current government of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejects.

Support for a confederation has not been confined to an ideological fringe

Welcoming the [E1 settlement expansion plan](#), which would further restrict Palestinian movement in the West Bank, Netanyahu’s hard-right finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, said: “The Palestinian state is being erased from the table, not with slogans, but with actions.”

Support for a confederation has not been confined to an ideological fringe. The year before the Hamas attack, two former peace negotiators, Palestine’s Hiba Hussein and Israel’s former economy minister, Yossi Beilin, argued that the confederal model aimed at developing a common historical narrative for the two peoples.

Since violence erupted, they have reprised their ideas for a [Holy Land Confederation](#) in international forums, including the UK’s Chatham House think-tank, arguing that both Israelis and Palestinians should have access to places to which they feel a historical, religious, cultural or familial connection.

A conventional two-state solution

European governments have either failed to take account of such initiatives or dismissed them as they cleave to a policy of supporting a conventional two-state solution, while condemning West Bank settlements as illegal.

Some have nevertheless adopted a more combative tone in response to settler violence

and Israel's expansion plans.



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The UK's new foreign minister, **Ed Miliband**, summoned the Israeli chargé d'affaires in London to demand the immediate reversal of the E1 settlement project.

He said the UK government planned to set out a comprehensive set of measures to respond to Israeli government policies, protect the viability of the Palestinian state, and target sanctions at those who participate in illegal settlement expansion.

In the face of the current Israeli government's intransigence, Miliband and his French, European and other international partners, might be said to be banging their heads against a brick wall when it comes to advancing the cause of a Palestinian state.

Perhaps it is time for them to at least examine and potentially foster alternative scenarios that might bolster democracy and freedoms for both nations in the land they share.