ONE REGION, TWO STATES

By Shimon Peres

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There is no shortage of opinions when it comes to Middle East affairs, and the recent events in Gaza have not muted them. A minority of Middle East pundits have recently emerged as advocates for a one-state solution, which would undermine Israel's legitimacy and internationally recognized right to exist as a sovereign Jewish state in the land of my forefathers. Having personally witnessed the remarkable progress we have made with the Palestinian Authority in recent years, I believe that a two-state solution is not only the best resolution to this age-old conflict but one within our reach.

The one-state solution has enough intrinsic flaws to render it no solution at all. From Israel's perspective, it is not possible for the Jewish people to accept an arrangement that signifies the end of the existence of a Jewish state. From the Palestinians' perspective, they should not be denied the opportunity to take their national destiny into their own hands.

Dissenters from the two-state solution contend -- not without some reason -- that Gaza and the West Bank are too small to absorb the Palestinian refugees. Yet this would also be the case under the one-state formula; it would result in a state that is merely 24,000 square kilometers and that already overflows with a population exceeding 10 million (5.5 million Jews and 4.5 million Arabs). While cynics might question the size of the West Bank and Gaza, optimists should look no further than Singapore for reassurance.

The area of the West Bank and Gaza is nine times as large as Singapore's, yet the combined population of Palestinians in both regions is smaller than that of Singapore. This Southeast Asian country enjoys one of the highest standards of living in the world. We have faith that the Palestinians are capable of achieving similar success, and we will continue to work tirelessly with our partners across the negotiating table to establish an autonomous Palestinian state where the people will institute a modern economy based on science, technology and the benefits of peace.

Establishing a single multinational country is a tenuous path that does not bode well for peace but, rather, enforces the conflict's perpetuation. Lebanon, ravaged by bloodshed and instability, represents only one of many examples of an undesirable quagmire of this nature.

The difficulties of a two-state solution are numerous, but it remains the only realistic and moral formula to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Those not committed to this solution argue that, after the creation of a Palestinian state, Israel's waist would be too narrow -- some six miles -- to ensure security for its citizens.

Indeed, six miles will be too narrow to guarantee full security, which only reinforces our belief that Israel's safety is not embedded only in territorial defense but in peace. Peace provides breadth of wings, even when the waist is narrow.

Last month Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi outlined his suggestions for a one-state solution. Although I disagree with his formula, I am encouraged by the manner in which he elucidates and builds his case.

Mostly, this is salient in his fundamental and central premise that "The Jewish people want and deserve their homeland." The resonance of these words is crucial, for they diametrically oppose the radical Muslim elements that reject the very right of the Jewish people to a homeland in the land of their forefathers and, on this basis, advocate a murderous jihad war whose goal is to destroy Israel.

The Jewish people want and deserve to live in peace in their rightful, historical homeland. The Palestinian people want and deserve their own land, their own political institutions and their right to self-determination. It is vital that this cause be based on the prospect of coexistence between Jews and Arabs, which translates into cooperation in fields such as the economy, tourism, the environment and defense. Achieving all this will be possible only by granting each people its own state and borders, to enable their citizens to pray according to their faiths, cultivate their cultures, speak their own languages and safeguard their heritages.

Let us commit our most concerted effort to allow these two states to flourish. Maybe one day, Israelis and Palestinians will choose, as in Europe, not to allow borders to inhibit economic coordination or to serve as a reason for war.

The writer is president of Israel.