COMMENTARY

A Mediterranean way for peace in Israel–Palestine?

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A state's origins do not determine its destiny, which always opens on to various possible histories even though some of them – depending on the circumstances – seem after the event to have been more likely than others. And yet the way events pile up, the dominant interpretation of them, the decisions that are taken (or not taken) year after year, the interplay of interests and the ideologies they crystallize, do sometimes trace what looks like a tragic fatality. It then requires a huge imaginative effort, and the support of the energy of despair, to see the outcome as anything but a catastrophe.

The State of Israel is the product of a combination of two movements characteristic of the nineteenth century and taken to extremes by the twentieth, with specific features of its own. Zionism was originally a combination of a typically nationalist phenomenon (a cultural and political project elaborated by sections of the oppressed Jewish communities of Central and Eastern Europe) and European colonialism. It allowed pioneer communities to settle in Palestine and to combine the egalitarian socialist utopia with the messianic dream of a 'return' to the Land of the Bible. These communities of Zionist Jews (collectively known as the *Yishuv*) and the political leadership they evolved then became a pawn in the 'Great Game' the British Empire was playing in the Arab world as it encouraged in turn different ethnic groups, dynasties and religions in order to dominate this strategic region and its immense oil wealth. The Balfour Declaration of 1917, which promised that a 'national home for the Jewish people' would be established in Palestine, was just one moment in this policy, which used the Zionists in the same way as it used other groups. The Zionists also succeeded, however, in using it for their own ends.

This does not, however, explain the problems that are now raised by the existence and policies of Israel or, more importantly, the problems facing its citizens. Everything changed after the Second World War, which left the British Empire weakened and forced hundreds of thousands of those who had survived the Nazi persecution to settle in Palestine. This gave a new moral legitimacy to the State of Israel, brought into being by the 'partition' of 1947 that was sanctioned by the almost universal international recognition given to Israel and its admission to the United Nations. The fact remains that the state which proclaimed itself to be a 'Jewish State' (despite the presence within it of a sizeable Muslim and Christian minority) and which assigned itself the mission of bringing together on its soil as many Jews – religious and secular – from all over the world (including recent immigrants and Jews who had long been assimilated into their respective countries and who are therefore very diverse in cultural terms, and who

had suffered, in some cases, from very different degrees of anti-Semitism) was born of war and even terrorism. This was due to both the irreducible hostility of the surrounding Arab states (at least until President Sadat's initiative), which were encouraged by their own nationalism and by the rise of pan-Arabism to reject the creation of Israel in Palestine or to demand its destruction, and to Israel's symmetrical intention, which was more or less openly stated, to expel the native Arab population. The words that were later attributed to Golda Meir ('a land without people for a people without land'), which were quite out of step with reality, led to an eliminationist logic. Certain intellectuals, such as Einstein, Buber, Arendt and Judah Magnes (who founded the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) warned against this from the outset, and it contained the seeds of elements of the present catastrophe.

The wars that lasted from the 1950s to the 1990s (some defensive and others offensive, including the first invasion of Lebanon in 1982) cannot be summarized here. But they led to a profound militarization of both social life and Israel's politicians and exacerbated its tendency to see political questions solely in terms of relations of force. Although it has one of the most powerful armies in the world and is equipped with the whole panoply of modern weapons – from helicopter-borne 'smart' missiles to nuclear bombs – and is as capable of targeting Palestinian militants as they lie in bed as it is of intervening thousands of kilometres away (as we have seen in Africa in particular), the State of Israel describes every conflict with its neighbours as a matter of life and death. This has played an important role in the gradual instrumentalization of the memory of the Shoah, which Israel has used to cement national unity, to silence criticisms from Jewish communities all over the world, and to claim to have special 'rights' in international relations, even if it does mean undermining one of the bases of its legitimacy.

More importantly, the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and the annexation of East Jerusalem after the (preventive) Six Day War, together with the two 'Intifadas' that followed, represented a second turning point. Far from representing an inversion of the logic of confrontation, the Oslo Agreements of 1993, which established the Palestinian Authority and looked forward to the establishment of two states on the former Mandate territory (78 per cent of which is currently officially in Israel's possession), were exploited in order to accelerate colonization and to reinforce the status quo. With hindsight, they look like a tactical moment within the conquest of a 'Greater Israel' and subsequent expropriations (including the building of the West Bank wall) are eloquent testimony to Israel's intentions. Under Yasser Arafat's leadership, the PLO was certainly not innocent of duplicity, not least because of the material advantages it derived from its delegated 'management' of the occupied territories. And it was only in 1988 that the articles of its founding Charter calling for the destruction of Israel were officially abrogated. For their part, certain Israeli leaders (like Yitzhak Rabin, who paid for it with his life) did appear to want to remove the great obstacle to any settlement of the Israeli–Palestinian dispute: namely, the stubborn refusal to talk to their enemies on an equal footing and to acknowledge their equal right to land, water, frontiers, security and internal recognition. But actions speak louder than words, and most of what has been said – regardless of the complexion of the government of the day – has served to emphasize further the colonial character of the State of Israel. The expression and pretext of 'unilateral withdrawal' now make this unambiguously clear. The Zionist state has developed an enviable form of political democracy (a parliamentary system, constitutional guarantees, freedom of opinion) and has, despite great social inequalities, achieved a high level of economic and cultural success (thanks in part to massive and permanent US aid on a scale that no other country has ever enjoyed). But in the various territories it controls it has established a form of apartheid (or what the geographer Oren Yiftachel calls 'ethnocracy') whose condition of existence is the confinement of the populations under its domination, control over their material resources and the

gradual destruction of their health and educational institutions, murderous violence against even non-violent resistance activity and their autonomous political leadership.

What, then, are we to make of the forms taken by the demand for the independence of the Palestinian nation? Idealizing them is out of the question, but we cannot overlook the conditions created by the crushingly disproportionate relations of force. This is especially true when it comes to the use of terrorism (defined in the strict sense of indiscriminate violence against civilian populations) and the tactic of using suicide bombers in particular, which has been adopted by groups of both secular and religious partisans and which was dramatically expanded during the 'Second Intifada'. We are among those who, like much of Palestinian civil society, and intellectuals and leaders such as Edward Said and Mustapha Barghouti, consider such actions morally unjustifiable, destructive and counterproductive, but we are hardly in the best position to denounce them. Those who practise mass terrorism with superior means constantly fuel them. They cannot, in any case, provide the only grid for a reading of Palestinian realities.

Imagining past the point of no return

There is no such thing as a Palestinian state today (and the prospect of there being one looks further and further away), but there is certainly a Palestinian nation and it is an irreducible fact. The contemporary tragedy still revolves around the recognition and denial of that fact, even though this tends gradually to escape the notice of its protagonists. The Palestinian nation's roots go back to before 1948, and even 1920. And yet it has become aware of its own singularity and has outlined a political project only as a result of the process of dismemberment it suffered at the time of the *naqbah*. The Palestinian national consciousness is therefore indissociable from the fact that the Palestinian nation has been shattered and dispersed into at least three components. Israeli Palestinians ('Arabs') make up about 20 per cent of the state's population and have been granted the right to vote and partial civil rights but suffer social, cultural and symbolic discrimination (if only because Israel is defined as a 'Jewish State'). The inhabitants of Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem are subject to various forms of banishment, occupation and control. Then there are the refugees in the camps of the Middle East and, further afield, in the diaspora. The categories themselves are not watertight, since Gaza might be likened to a vast camp – perhaps the biggest in history – and the inhabitants of East Jerusalem became 'Israeli Arabs' when the whole of the city was annexed, even though they were not actually accorded that status.

The only way this shattered nation can survive is to go on hoping that it can be reunified and that its rights will be recognized, and through organized resistance. But it is divided, along lines that change over time, between the juridical status and material interests of its various component elements, and between collective identifications derived from secular nationalism in some cases and religious populism in others, not forgetting the cosmopolitical dimension that developed during the years of exile and against the common backdrop of the multiculturalism of the eastern Mediterranean. It is therefore all the more remarkable that the Palestinians have more or less succeeded in limiting their internal conflicts and in pulling back from the brink of the civil wars into which various parties wanted to drag them. Witness the recent agreement reached between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority on the basis of the 'prisoners document'. Constantly oscillating between the temptation to fall back on its own forces and the hope that public opinion and international institutions will turn in its favour, the Palestinian nation has to face up to two problems, each almost as insoluble as the other: one concerning its relations with the Arab and Muslim world, and the other concerning the future of its relations with Israel.

Palestinians are, of course, part of the 'Arab world'. They expect it to be their primary source of material solidarity and political support, but it is also the Arab

world that has dealt them some of their heaviest blows, especially when they appeared to be in a position to influence the evolution of certain of its states from within. The 'Palestinian cause' has crystallized emotions and hopes for revenge on successive imperialisms. It has served as a revolutionary example and has inspired long-term internationalism even outside the region. It has also encouraged the development of a previously limited mass anti-Judaism in the land of Islam, and has fuelled many 'proxy struggles' which compensate in the imaginery for collective impotence. And it has been used from the outset by Arab states, both at home, where it provides an outlet for anger fuelled by corruption, the absence of public freedoms and social injustice, and abroad, where it is a card that can be played in rivalries between the states of the Middle East or as an argument to be used in their negotiations and confrontations with the great powers that are fighting for hegemony in the region. This is why the independence of Palestinian organizations has always come under threat. From that point of view, it seems that the contemporary period is characterized by an increase rather than a decrease of their independence, as the elections in the Occupied Territories demon-strated (even though part of the Hamas leadership is in Damascus). Things may change if Israeli repression makes the situation in Palestine untenable and if the Middle Eastern struggle against Western imperialism (essentially American imperialism, of which the Israeli occupation is seen as an integral part) intensifies and is united by a single trans-national religious ideology. That, however, seems unlikely.

There is a symmetrical problem concerning relations with Israel, in the long term if not in the short run. It is, however, of a very different kind. Would the destruction of the State of Israel be in the Palestinian interest? The answer is probably 'yes' as the destruc-tion of its masters is in the interest of any oppressed people, and all the more so in that the forces in favour of an equal settlement are now in a smaller minority than ever, and in that the international community has obviously given up trying to impose any such solution – even in the forms envisaged at Camp David and Taba (which were still unsat-isfactory given that they had nothing to say about the condition of the 'Israeli Arabs' and did not restore the balance between the Israeli 'law of return' and the Palestinian refugees' 'right to return'). But would the destruction of Israel, which would inevitably take the form of reciprocal massacres and the displacement of populations, resolve the problems of the future of the Palestinian nation, even assuming that the balance of power makes it possible one day? Nothing could be less certain, primarily because half a century of the existence and development of Israel has, in practice, succeeded in erasing what was once the old Palestine (and even its landscape) and has revolutionized the region's economy by contributing to a capitalist development from which Palestinians are excluded but on which they are also dependent. The odds are that this dependency would simply be replaced by dependency on the development of oil-rich and/or militarized Arab states. What Palestinians need is not the destruction of Israel, but its transforma-tion. It is true that this would have to mean a radical, and therefore perhaps even more unlikely, transformation, as it would involve a radical decolonization, a renunciation of the unilateralist tradition and the abuse of force. The Israeli nation and its historical consciousness would have to undergo a profound transformation if the two peoples that now live in Palestine are to discover new constitutional forms of economic and cultural harmony that will – at last – allow them political equality under the auspices of an effec-tive international authority that can guarantee their security.

We are now further away than ever from realizing the preconditions for such a solution, or from any intermediate perspective that might facilitate a new 'peace process' based upon negotiations between the parties involved. It may even seem that they have gone for ever and that the situation is slipping towards the point of no return. This is because the specificity of the Israeli–Palestinian problem is being dissolved into a much broader conflict. Its contours are still unclear, but it is becoming increasingly violent and increas-

ingly beyond the control of its actors: the United States and its various allies (which display varying degrees of reliability), on the one hand, and the anti-American states and 'fundamentalist' Islamic movements, on the other. Many people therefore take the view that the Israeli–Palestinian problem must be resolved as a matter of urgency by finally bringing the required pressure and means to bear in order to defuse this coming 'Clash of Civilizations'. But is there enough time? And who is going to resolve the problem?

A council of the sea

Exporting a 'democracy' modelled on and designed for the West, and using force to mould a 'New Middle East', are no more than neoconservative fantasies, but they are murderous fantasies. Using the greatest ever terrorist attack on the United States as a pretext, and to cover up what is in fact an attempt to establish a more or less guaranteed imperial hegemony, the Bush administration's interventions have already succeeded in transforming Afghanistan and Iraq into theatres of war and terrorism, with no foreseeable end in sight. One day, we will learn how the decision to launch the Israeli intervention that has been destroying Lebanon was taken, but it is unlikely to have been taken without the green light from the United States. In any case, it enjoys American support and is part of the global strategy of a 'war on terror'. The enemies of the United States, for their part, are not willing to be left behind. Playing with fire and well aware of the growing difficulties the former 'hyperpower' is facing, they believe that it is very much in their interest to create more flashpoints. Some wish to re-establish the caliphate; others want to be the dominant power in the Middle East. But it is not bin Laden who is inspiring or manipulating Hamas. Syria and Iran are rearming Hezbollah in order to re-establish their regional influence in the same way that Israel armed and used the Phalange, but they are not al-Qaeda. Only when the national and theological conflicts that are tearing the Arab and Muslim world apart are a thing of the past will it be possible to say that politics has finally acquired a new legitimacy in the region. But both the crusade against the 'axis of evil' and the renewed calls for the elimination of the 'Zionist entity' and for jihad are still tearing the Arab world apart. It is obvious for all to see that Bush and Ahmadinejad need each other and that the rhetoric of one is modelled on the rhetoric of the other.

It is obvious that by opening up a third front in Lebanon after making a new and violent intervention in Gaza, by launching 'total war' operations that affect mainly the civilian population and at the same time demonstrating that its army is ineffective against a guerrilla movement, Israel has embarked on an era that does not bode well, either for Israel or for its neighbours. The United States is beginning to learn the same lesson. Israel's policies are making a peaceful settlement with the Palestinians and with the countries of the Middle East as a whole an ever more distant possibility. It is putting its own existence into jeopardy in a way that it has never done before.

We have, then, reached a strategic turning point in this violent history. There is no avoiding the consequences. In the long term, the United States' neo-imperial enterprise will end in failure, if it has not already done so, but when the USA does withdraw it will leave behind a field of ruins, heavily armed and fanaticized enemies, and populations that defy or hate anything to do with the 'West'. In an environment that will be more hostile than ever, Israel will survive only by keeping its own citizens in a permanent state of mobilization, by building more and more internal fortifications, by creating 'buffer zones' that have been razed to the ground to prevent guerrilla forces from using them as bases, and by launching massive 'deterrence' operations – perhaps nuclear – against the states of the region. It may take ten, twenty or even fifty years for the collapse to come, but it is likely that the Palestinian and Lebanese nations will suffer irretrievable damage in the meantime. It is impossible to calculate the precise timetable, but the spiral is inexorable and the outcome is being decided now.

What can be done against an inevitability that is being promoted by human beings, ideologies, the interests of power and political systems, now that, having let slip the opportunity to intervene on the side of the poorest, we have gone beyond a state of emergency and everything seems to have been decided in advance? The question is all the more acute for Europe in that it does not concern events that are taking place far away and that have hypothetical implications. They are part of Europe's history. Neighbourhood relations, exchanges of population, economic and cultural interests, and both past and present responsibilities (starting with colonial expansion and then the extermination of the Jews of Europe, which made it possible to implement the Zionist project) all mean that Europe is deeply involved. It is at the time when the difficulties and the common danger are greatest that we have to make a huge imaginative effort and find the will to reverse the course of events, and therefore to see them for what they really are.

Given Israel's increased militarism and its 'response' to resistance activity that does sometimes take the form of terrorism – and its response is not merely 'disproportion-ate', as the saying goes; it takes the suicidal form of actual war crimes – Europe cannot afford to be complacent or to go on ruminating about its bad conscience. On the con-trary, it must bring to bear all the pressures and convictions at its disposal. Those meas-ures may have to include a suspension of privileged cooperation agreements that bind it to Israel – their moral clauses have obviously been breached – as well as a demand for a withdrawal from all the territories that were occupied in 1967. If need be, Europe must act unilaterally and defy the will and the stalling tactical manoeuvres of those governments that are most directly in thrall to the United States. It must at all events clearly distance itself from the United States for so long as American policy remains dominated by the same theologico-imperial forces. Above all, it must, to the extent that it can do so, reformulate international policies on the basis of right as well as actual historical situations. Which means, in very concrete terms, recognizing the democratically elected repre-sentatives of the Palestinian people and demanding once more – by going to the General Assembly, if need be – the implementation of all UN resolutions concerning Palestine and the Middle East. It means a commitment to giving the UN real authority; at the moment the secretary general of the Human Rights Commission is preaching in the desert. Even if there is reason to think that there is a need for a reform of the international organization, we must first reverse the downward spiral in the realm of law and collective security that began with the invasion of Iraq and that is dragging the UN towards the same bankruptcy that destroyed the League of Nations.

Europe must, finally, deliberately work towards the construction of a Mediterranean space for

cooperation and negotiation in the form of a permanent regional 'council' or 'conference' of all the peoples of the Mediterranean. The United States and Russia could enjoy observer status, as could Iran or Iraq, but its 'natural' members are those countries bordering the sea they share and whose history they have made: from Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel-Palestine and Egypt in the East, to Tunisia, Morocco and Spain in the West. Such a space is by definition heterogeneous: it is multicultural, multiconfessional, politically diverse and torn between conflicting economic and demographic interests. It does not provide a guarantee of peace. But it does provide the only antidote imaginable to the logic of the current situation, and the only thing that can force fundamentalism, post-colonial racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia into retreat. The establishment of a Mediterranean political space would finally allow Israel to abandon its exclusive dependency on the United States and bring it close to the countries of the North and the South, which are after all where most of its population comes from. At the same time, it would allow the Palestinians and Lebanese to escape an over-restrictive and exclusive relationship with the Arab world. In the long term, such a space could guarantee Israel's collective security in exchange for a historic mutation on its part. It would restore Palestinian (and Lebanese) faith that law and negotiations can satisfy their demands for equality, independence and justice.

'Must' is of course to be read as meaning 'should', if we wish to avoid the worst of all outcomes. But do we really want that? This is a question not just for governments, but for all of us.

Translated by David Macey

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