

ISRAEL/PALESTINE - ONE STATE OR TWO?

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CRUELTY OF THE TWO-STATE SOLUTION

Pro-Palestinian demonstrators have been much criticised for the slogan 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.' It is said that this is a denial of Israel's right to exist. And maybe it is. But in the original 1977 manifesto of the Likud Party - the party of Israeli prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, we have this: 'between the Sea and the Jordan there will only be Israeli sovereignty.' And in the 'decisive plan' for a final settlement of the conflict presented in 2017 by the current Minister of Finance in the Israeli government, Bezalel Smotrich, we read: 'We will make it clear that our national ambition for a Jewish state from the river to the sea is an accomplished fact, a fact not open to discussion or negotiation.'

And of course, whatever about 'discussion or negotiation', Smotrich is right to say that the 'Jewish state from the river to the sea' is an accomplished fact. There is only one government exercising sovereignty over the whole area from the Jordan to the Mediterranean. There is only one state and that is why it is possible to talk about an 'apartheid state.' As the Israel historian Benny Morris has pointed out, Israel within its pre-1967 borders is not an apartheid state, though it's not far off. The Palestinians who remained in the area after the ethnic cleansing of 1948 possess, at least in theory, full citizenship. It wouldn't be true to say that they possess equal citizenship. Their position resembles perhaps an even worse form of second class citizenship than that previously enjoyed by Catholics in Northern Ireland but that still isn't 'apartheid'. Apartheid, as Benny Morris points out, translates as 'separation'. In a recent BBC interview, done in the wake of the Hamas action of October 7th, the former Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, said: 'I will never lose eye contact with the ultimate objective, which is to separate ourselves from the Palestinians ...'

One can see that that, part of the Israeli secularist Labour Party tradition, is different from the position of Likud or Smotrich. And yet it is not very different. Barak continues somewhat ungrammatically: 'having Israel which have probably 80% of the settlers holding strategic assets on several [sic] percent of the West Bank side by side with the Palestinian demilitarised viable state.'

That is the 'two state solution' as envisaged by one of its few remaining champions among Israeli Jews. A 'viable' Palestinian state deprived of the means of defending itself. It falls rather short of the 'two state solution' to which President Biden still gives lip service: 'two peoples living side by side with equal measures of freedom, opportunity and dignity.' The separation envisaged by Barak is classic apartheid - a bantustan. It isn't a fully sovereign state enjoying 'equal measures of freedom, opportunity and dignity' with the state of Israel. Israel would still exercise a monopoly of armed force and control over strategic assets on the 'Palestinian' territory. A fully sovereign Palestinian state would have the right to develop its own army to a level capable of repelling its most probable adversary; it would have full control over everyone living within its borders, including Jewish settlers if

they were still there; and it would have free access to other countries in the world including its neighbour Jordan - Ehud Barak at his most conciliatory in the Camp David talks insisted that Israel should control the border between 'Palestine' and Jordan.

Even after the current slaughter taking place in Gaza it is generally assumed that the whole Palestinian population in the area from the river to the sea is not far off the numbers of the Jewish population - if it has not already surpassed it. If we add the numbers of those living in refugee camps outside Israel - and the return of the refugees is a fundamental Palestinian demand - then the Palestinian majority is overwhelming.¹ This population, with its free military capacity and free relations with the rest of the Arab/Muslim world, including Jordan, would be crammed into something like 20% of the total area, with no possibility of accommodating the refugees, beside a state which they knew was built on the spoliation and expulsion of their own population back in 1948. Not only would the Jews not accept such a state of affairs they would in my view have been stupid to accept it. It would represent a constant threat, more powerful than the threat they suffer at the present time.

This has of course been the problem for Zionism since the beginning. Jabotinsky's 'iron wall' strategy was based on the idea that the Jews would intimidate the Arabs by sheer force of numbers. But in 1947, at the time of the UN partition plan, the Jews were still a distinct minority - 1,293,000 Palestinians (Muslim and Christian) and 608,000 Jews, with the Jews owning only about 6 or 7% of the land. Hence the need to expel and dispossess some 7-800,000 people and to give up hope (temporarily at least) of taking the West Bank.

In their own history, when David Ben-Gurion formally accepted the UN 1947 partition plan it was with the clear understanding that the possession of a state, however truncated it might be compared to his ambitions, would, together with the departure of the British, serve as a launching pad for the further acquisition of territory. He had already said, back in 1937: 'Erect a Jewish state at once, even if it is not in the whole land. The rest will come in the course of time.' It is perfectly reasonable to assume that Yasser Arafat, when he agreed to the deeply unjust Oslo plan, had much the same thought in mind. It is also reasonable to assume that the Israeli government, which immediately began planting settlers in the areas of the West Bank under its control, never seriously considered the possibility of allowing a genuine, truly sovereign Palestinian state to emerge on that territory.

After 1967 they had been able to go along with the fiction that the Palestinians in the West Bank were still Jordanian citizens. But in 1988, in the context of the first intifada, Jordan renounced its claim to sovereignty over the area (with the exception of its guardianship of the Muslim holy places) and recognised its old enemy, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. The Jews were

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faced with a choice between granting the West Bank Palestinians Israeli citizenship rights or bringing the PLO back into the picture and using them to keep the Palestinians separate from the Israeli political system. The PLO, sitting in Tunisia, were by now so weak after their expulsion from Lebanon, that this appeared to them like a gift from Heaven.

In pursuit of this policy the secularist Jews, principally concerned as they were with security, were willing in principle to hand over day to day management of a large part of the West Bank to the Palestinian Authority - of course under rigorous Israeli military surveillance. Unfortunately, though, in the eyes of Jews who took seriously the notion that they were returning to the land given them by God, this land, known to Jordan as its own 'West Bank', was 'Judaea-Samaria', the heartland of the Biblical Jewish territory. It should be said that there were Jewish settlements in the West Bank prior to Oslo, mainly, so far as I can see, people who simply wanted to be living near the holy sites mentioned in the Bible (I'm using the Christian term. The Jewish term for the whole text known to Christians as the 'Old Testament' is the *Tanakh*) - Hebron, Shiloh, Jericho, Nablus (the Biblical Shechem). Similarly East Jerusalem was the old Jerusalem with its Christian, Jewish and Muslim holy sites and, consequently, a substantial Orthodox Jewish population whose motives had historically been more religious than political. I don't know the details - the extent to which the departure was a matter of deliberate Jordanian policy, but the fact is that after 1948 there were very few Jews, if any, left in the area. I do know that the main synagogue in East Jerusalem, already damaged like many other holy sites in the fighting, was finally and deliberately dynamited by the Jordanians. It is also interesting to note that during the period of Jordanian rule the word 'Palestinian' was taboo. That having been said, I remember that the late Peter Coleridge, a good friend of mine who had been involved in building the UN supervised refugee camps for the Palestinians expelled in 1967, was impressed by the dynamism and entrepreneurial spirit of the West Bank under Jordanian rule.

ONE STATE SOLUTIONS - JEWISH AND PALESTINIAN

All this might serve as background to the main point I want to make: which is that whatever the outcome of the present conflict it won't be, to quote Biden again: 'two peoples living side by side with equal measures of freedom, opportunity and dignity,' certainly not in the presently envisaged boundaries - West Bank and Gaza. That is too much for the Jews and not enough for the Palestinians. It is also extremely unlikely that anything resembling Barak's 'Palestinian demilitarised viable state' will emerge. In the course of the history of the Israeli state something rather remarkable has happened - the evolution of Orthodox Judaism from an initial hostility to Zionism (seen as a movement wanting to pull Jews away from faithfulness to the traditional Jewish law and way of life), through a period of using secular Zionism to promote its own essentially religious interests, then coming into full alignment with secular Zionism, then becoming the most extreme wing of the Zionist movement. Orthodox Jews (taking that as a broad term and disregarding the various different factions within it) now constitute some 30% of the Jewish population of Israel. Shortly before the events of October 7th we were witnessing a major confrontation between religious Jews and secular Jews - both of them Zionist, both

oblivious to the interests of the Palestinians - over the question of the Supreme Court. The religious Jews - leaving out of account the Satmar and Neturei Kartei anti-Zionist tendencies - are absolutely committed to keeping Judaea-Samaria, aka the West Bank as an integral part of the Jewish state. A Jewish 'one state solution - from the river to the sea.' Precisely the outcome the secular Jewish supporters of Oslo hoped to avoid. Failing a very thoroughgoing ethnic cleansing (still the most desired result but apparently impossible given the refusal of the rest of the Arab world to co-operate) the Israeli government would have to take some responsibility for the day to day management of the Palestinians, granting them some form of citizenship.

Following the 'One state' programme outlined by the current Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich, this would be very much a second class form of citizenship, without the right to vote for the Knesset, and would be entirely dependent on an acceptance - *de facto* if not *de jure* - of the Jewish state. Nonetheless Smotrich promises those Palestinians who renounce Palestinian nationhood 'life with the maximum of democratic rights: life, liberty and property, a life of freedom of religion and expression ... it will also contain the right to vote for the system that governs their everyday lives. The self-government of the Arabs of Judaea and Samaria will be divided into six municipal governmental regions wherein representatives will be elected in democratic elections: Hebron, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jericho, Nablus and Jenin' (one assumes that these municipal governments would have no authority over Jewish inhabitants in the region, though this isn't stated). ... Free of terror and a security threat [sic, presumably 'no longer a security threat'], the residents of the regional municipal administrations will enjoy freedom of movement and the right of entry - for work and for humanitarian reasons - into Israeli settlements in Judaea and Samaria and the state of Israel to the benefit of all [note that he is still drawing a distinction between the 'State of Israel' and the Arab administrations, and he is not giving the Arabs the right to do anything other than work for the Jews in their settlements and in the State of Israel - certainly not a right to live with them. The ghost of apartheid is still very much present] ... It will be possible to concede granting full citizenship as a third option, including voting for the Knesset, in accordance with the number of Arab residents who wish to do so and alongside the declaration of complete loyalty to the Jewish state by serving in the armed forces, much like Israel's Druze citizens who have tied their fate to the State of Israel as a Jewish state and maintain a partnership of courage with it.'

The 'hair in the soup' of all that - or at least one of them - is Smotrich's conviction that it will be impossible so long as the Palestinians retain any hope of retaining their own state, their own existence as a nation. They must first be reduced to despair, and that is the purpose of the settler movement. Smotrich is himself a settler and though he insists that his plan is 'not a religious manifesto but a realistic, geopolitical, strategic document', he also declares his belief 'in the Torah which foretold the exile and promised redemption. I believe in the words of the prophets who witnessed the destruction and no less in the renewed building that has taken shape before our eyes.'²

² Of course the destruction witnessed by the prophets was the destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians, their exile was the one they themselves experienced in Babylon, and I imagine most mainstream Christian interpreters would see the return as referring to the events described in Ezra and Nehemiah and the building of the second Temple.

There is, then, a little bit of carrot for the Palestinians in Smotrich's plan. Unlike the secular Labour Party project it gives some sort of status to West Bank Palestinians within the Israeli polity. A very limited status. But what is most noticeable is that the stick comes first. And since Smotrich is one of the most militant members of Netanyahu's very militant government the stick is very large and very brutal. He admits that in the first instance it would result in an increase of what he calls 'terrorism'. But one might have thought that after more than seventy years of applying ever more brutal sticks to the Palestinians the Jews would have noticed that it was having the opposite to the desired effect. Smotrich argues that the Palestinians are not a nation, they are an assemblage of smaller Arab communities each with its own distinct traditional culture ('Hebron, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jericho, Nablus and Jenin' - nothing of course in pre-1967 Israel). The argument is almost amusing when we think of the different cultures that have been welded together, with many of the faultlines still quite visible, to create the Israeli Jewish nation. Nations are often formed in adversity. It could be said that the Jews were formed into a nation by Adolf Hitler and by the same token the Palestinians have been formed into a nation by the Jews.

Maybe I've given Smotrich's 'one state solution' more attention than it deserves. But it is a proposal apparently based on the real disposition of power - at least as it was before the present assault on Gaza when it seems the Jewish state may have overreached itself with consequences that are still unknown. The 'one state solution' proposed on the Palestinian side - for example Ghada Karmi's recent 'One state, the only democratic future for Palestine-Israel' or Ali Abunimah's 'One country, a bold proposal to end the Israeli-Palestinian impasse' (2007) and his 2014 book 'Battle for justice in Palestine, the case for a single democratic state in Palestine - are based on 'justice'; on the argument that a single democratic state with equal rights for all its citizens is the best possible outcome. Both argue that the two state solution, with the Palestinians crammed into the West Bank and Gaza and no right of return for refugees expelled in 1948 and 1967 is profoundly unjust. For this reason I think the demand for a separate Palestinian state, which has simply served as cover for the denial of Palestinian rights, should be dropped and replaced with the demand for a single democratic state with equal rights for all its citizens. It is the best - the most equitable - outcome that can be envisaged. If it is said that it is an impossible demand, well, the demand for a two state solution - the demand for a separate Palestinian state - has also proved to be impossible and is in any case a demand for an unstable and inequitable outcome. And one of the virtues of the single democratic state is that a case can be made that it is in the best interests of the Jews. To quote Ali Abunimah (well known as a major advocate of the BDS movement, and founder of the Electronic Intifada): 'What if an Israeli Jew who wanted to live in Hebron, or a Palestinian who wanted to move to Tel Aviv or Jaffa, was simply able to do so? For Israeli Jews, the key goals of Zionism would be realised. If not a monopoly on power, they would have a permanent, protected and vibrant national presence in all of Israel-Palestine, as partners and equals, not as occupiers.'

COULD THERE BE A CHANGE OF HEART?

But it is of course an outcome that would require the consent of both peoples - and we're about as far from that as it would be possible to imagine. When I visit Youtube I watch channels like the Grayzone or Ali Abunimah's own Electronic Intifada which claim to be able to debunk many of the Israeli stories of atrocity that occurred on October 7th. But the Israeli public receives a constant stream of such atrocity stories and in their eyes the debunking of Grayzone or Electronic Intifada amounts to 'holocaust denial.' According to opinion polls 90% of Israeli Jews approve of the assault on Gaza, 60% think it isn't going hard enough. Only 1.5% disapprove. Prominent Israeli commentator Caroline Glick complains that Biden, calling for a 'humanitarian pause' and for 'observing the laws of war' with regard to civilians, is actually wanting Israel to lose. There is an assumption on the other hand that Palestinians on the West Bank, given the opportunity, would vote overwhelmingly for Hamas. On both sides this has become a very black and white affair of good versus absolute evil with a pretty complete solidarity on each side.

But, we should remember, it was not always thus. I still remember back in 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon to get rid of the PLO, and then oversaw the Christian massacre of Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Chatila, there were huge protest demonstrations organised by Israeli Jews and it seemed at the time as though Ariel Sharon's career was finished. Then again, although I have given a sceptical interpretation of the motives of the Jewish leadership in agreeing to a 'two state solution', Oslo was welcomed with delight by a large part of Jewish Israeli opinion who, I'm quite sure, really believed that the Palestinians were about to be given a genuine state of their own. Smotrich claims, probably rightly, that Uri Avnery (who continued to produce very readable weekly accounts of Israeli politics until his death in 2018) was the first to start pushing for the two state solution (he clung to it to the end but clearly saw it slipping through his fingers). Avnery's 'Gush Shalom' movement, arguing for good relations between the two peoples, was, back in those days, a force to be reckoned with.

The great change in public opinion occurred, I believe, with Hamas's use of the suicide bomb during the second Intifada. One can see the attraction. The discrepancy between Palestinians killed and Israelis killed dropped briefly from about 10:1 to 3:1. But it is a terrifying weapon. What does an Israeli mother do, however 'liberal' her opinions, if she's standing at a bus stop with her children and the queue is joined by a young Arab with a rucksack? At that point the large Jewish Israeli public were willing to do anything to protect themselves from the danger, hence there were no mass Jewish protests against the monstrosity of the separation wall.

Be that as it may, my point remains that things have changed. They've changed for the worse maybe they can change for the better. At some point (though we've been waiting for this for a long time) it may dawn on the Israelis that they are paying a heavy price for their exclusively Jewish state - that Israel, created as a safe haven for Jews after what they had suffered in Europe, is now the most dangerous place in the world for Jews to live. According to an article in the online Middle East commentary *The Cradle*, in the wake of October 7th and of the actions of Hezbollah on the Northern border: 'One in three businesses have shuttered or are operating at 20% capacity, data from the Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics revealed'. According to the *Times of Israel*, some 470,000 Israelis have

left the country - maybe temporarily but maybe not - and there has been a decline of around 70% in the numbers coming in. Apparently there are already around 1.2 million Israeli citizens living outside the country, though still counted in the official population statistics. Despite all efforts to escape it, the demographic problem remains as solidly intact as it was in 1948.

As things stand Israeli Jews will never be at peace - the type of brutal, morally debilitating brutality they have been engaged in since 1948 but progressively getting worse will have to continue and continue and continue. I may be as shocked as anyone about the current action in Gaza but I can see the 'necessity' for it. It is a necessity built into the very existence of an exclusively Jewish state. The two state solution gives neither side what it wants - free access the whole territory. It only prolongs the war. The single 'state for all its citizens', to use the slogan of the Arab-Israeli political party, Balad, gives both sides what they want - free access to the whole territory. It is the only imaginable outcome that could bring permanent peace. From the river to sea, Palestine and Israel together could be free.