

# Waiting for the Barbarians: When Palestine Becomes Finland

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I recall an incident that took place in the early 1990s, well before the Oslo Agreements were signed, while I was attending one of the many dialogue meetings between Palestinians and Israelis convened by Americans. In retrospect, these meetings ended up being almost totally useless. At one point in the discussion, I blurted out that a two-state solution seemed totally unrealistic, given the many facts on the ground that the Israelis had created, and that sometime soon the Palestinians would have to begin calling for equal rights of citizenship in one state for two people. Our Israeli counterparts were speechless. During the break, they asked my Palestinian colleagues if they thought I was serious and whether such an option had any support among the Palestinians. To which my Palestinian colleagues responded, presuming to speak on my behalf, that I was simply saying that if the Israelis don't give the Palestinians a state, the latter will be forced to demand equal rights within one state for both people.

It is interesting that only a short time ago, the option of one state for two people appeared, for the Palestinians, to be a tool whereby they could threaten the Israelis in order to speed up the achievement of a two-state settlement. A few years later, the logic of things on the ground began to make the two-state option appear most unlikely, as the West Bank was increasingly swallowed up by ever-expanding Jewish settlements whose numbers began to multiply under both Labor and Likud governments alike. The notion of one state for two people was no longer taboo. All sorts of people began to talk about it: Israelis, Palestinians, and others. Books began to be written about it, and many edito-

rialists began to consider it a possible option. Increasingly, as the political divide in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appeared unbridgeable, the prospect of a one-state solution predicated on equal rights of citizenship began to look more and more attractive.

One can actually read the most recent unilateral Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip as in some way related to the evolving logic of a one-state solution. In reality, it is Israel's way of taking unilateral measures designed, in essence, to forestall such an eventuality. How else can one interpret talk about the demographic threat that the Palestinian population poses to the Jewishness of the state? The very same logic underlies Israel's approach to the West Bank. This logic is fundamentally based on the twin principles of separation through disengagement and the building of the Wall, which, for all practical purposes, means unilaterally drawing the borders of the State of Israel.

However, there is a difference between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In the latter case, the Israelis couldn't care less what the Palestinians do in this large, carefully controlled prison, as long as they don't lob missiles into Israeli towns. In the former, the approach will be different. Here, the Israelis will follow a more proactive policy of interfering in a variety of ways to ensure that the Palestinians behave acceptably. For example, the Israelis decide whether the Palestinians should have elections and, if so, who can run in these elections. Recently, in order to prevent Hamas from participating in the upcoming legislative council elections, the Israelis arrested hundreds of their political activists, the kind of people who would have

stood for election to the Palestinian legislative assembly.

For the Israeli government, and for the current American administration, a liberated (albeit controlled) Gaza is offered as a testing ground for the Palestinians, who will have to show that they can control the situation, disarm the various militia, and manage a state. If they do, then the Israelis are supposed to resume their unilateral disengagement from parts of the West Bank, effectively dividing it between Israel and the new emerging Palestinian entity/state—an entity that can hardly be called a state, since it is divided into isolated cantons and has no meaningful resources. If the Palestinians fail and continue fighting each other (the Israelis, by the way, will make sure they do so), then the argument will be made that the Palestinians are incapable of running their own affairs and that the two territories will have to be placed under Egyptian and Jordanian mandate.

Eventually, the Israelis would prefer that the Gaza Strip fall under the aegis of Egypt while the populated parts of the West Bank from which they will withdraw fall under the aegis of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, perhaps under some scheme of confederation, with a link of sorts between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, already being planned by the World Bank emissary to the region.

Is it conceivable that this arrangement will be accepted by the Palestinians, the Arabs, and the European powers? Judging by the American-inspired campaign to reward Mr. Sharon for his “historic” moves and for the supposedly “painful concessions” that Israel made in its disengagement from the Gaza Strip, the enthusiastic reception given Mr. Sharon at the United Nations (in the good old days, all Arab delegates would simply have walked out during his speech), and the rush to normalize relations with Israel on the part of Arab and non-Arab Muslim states such as Pakistan, it is highly likely that Israel will continue to determine unilaterally the course of action that it deems best to

guarantee its interests. The Palestinians will be told that this is the best they can hope for under current conditions, and the Arabs, who are, in any case, totally helpless and ineffective, will have, according to their logic of dependence on the Americans, no choice but to go along (although, in reality, they do have a choice). The Europeans will continue to defer to the Americans in matters of Middle Eastern diplomacy, even if they are convinced that the Americans are on the wrong track.

In essence, what is emerging is a “no solution” solution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. A “no solution” means several things: it involves an indefinite deferral of a final settlement of the conflict. As Dov Weisglass told Ari Shavit in his interview in *Haaretz*, “Effectively, this whole package that is called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed from our agenda indefinitely. And all this with authority and permission. All with a presidential blessing [referring to President Bush’s letter reassuring Israel that the settlement blocs will remain part of Israel] and the ratification of both houses of Congress” (reproduced in *Counterpunch*, 11 October 2004). Weisglass goes on to say that this deferral will go on until “Palestine becomes Finland.” At the same time, it involves a process of “decolonizing colonization,” to use a term coined by my friend Andre Mazawi: in essence, a process of decolonization designed to strengthen and legitimate the process of colonization of the West Bank. The Israelis will have bought themselves some time and will feel a sense of accomplishment for having eliminated pressures on them from both inside and outside, as Weisglass so clearly spelled out in his interview. The Palestinians will be able to breathe for a moment and try to recover from the destruction inflicted on them by the Israelis during the years of the Second Intifada. But the basics of the historic conflict will still be there, awaiting another time, another set of actors, and perhaps yet another costly confrontation.

To my knowledge, no assessment has

been made by the Palestinians of the outcome of the recent bloody conflict with Israel, which began in September 2000 and has cost thousands of Palestinian casualties. A careful review of what went wrong, what was accomplished (if anything), and what can be learned from the conflict is absolutely necessary. Until then, however, one can safely say that neither side was victorious in a decisive way. The Israelis, who are overwhelmingly more powerful than the Palestinians, have inflicted huge damage on the latter. They can declare themselves victorious and act accordingly in an environment where they seem to have a great deal of freedom of manoeuvre. But the bottom line is that they have not been able to subdue the Palestinians. The Palestinian will to resist has not been broken.

Undeniably, however, new objective conditions will begin to emerge, and new patterns of relations will develop among the various actors. New and creative forms of resistance will also begin to emerge. Already we are beginning to see these nascent forms here and there: villagers organizing to fight against the Wall and against the theft of their land; legal challenges at various levels, including charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity that will make it difficult for many Israelis to leave their country. Gone are the days when world public opinion immediately sprang to Israel's defence. In a globalized world, with more effective means of mass communication and with numerous alternative sources of information that challenge the hegemony of the American media, it is difficult for Israel to hide its crimes. Already, we see active movement throughout the world to boycott Israeli products, divest from Israeli companies, and boycott Israeli

academics. These developments are limited in scope at the moment, but they form a nucleus for what may come in the future.

It is somewhat misleading to think in terms of similarities, or simplistic analogies, between what the Israeli right is doing and what the Afrikaners did in South Africa under the apartheid system. What is happening in Israel/Palestine is infinitely worse and more complicated than what occurred in South Africa. New terms must be created to explain it, and new ways of resistance must be discovered to struggle against it.

I no longer think the Israeli–Palestinian problem can be resolved within the old nationalist rubric, meaning a state for the Jews and a state for the Arabs. The Zionist colonial project has relentlessly created conditions on the ground that make it next to impossible to divide the land of historic Palestine into two nation-states. But the Palestinians remain as a major obstacle to that project's historic mission, and the conflict will go on, taking new and unpredictable turns. I think we may be entering a new era in the struggle for Palestinian rights, one where the affirmation of basic civil and political liberties, as well as economic rights, will supplant the old nationalist construction. The time may yet come when the question of whether a state is Jewish or Arab is replaced by more important questions as to what kind of state it is and what kinds of rights it guarantees its citizens. This may sound utopian in the current climate of entrenched ethnicity and the building of rigid walls and borders. But conditions in the region are likely to change dramatically in years to come, and new possibilities may yet emerge.