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Israel's Terrible Problem: Two States or One?

By John Chuckman
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Israel has created a terrible problem which it is incapable of solving. That is why it has always been the case that the United States must pretty much dictate a solution, but it is unable to do so, paralyzed as it is by the heavy influence of Israel and America's own apologists and lobbyists.

Trump's suggestion of a one-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict is welcomed by some because Israel's settler policy is said to have made two states impossible, as it was most certainly intended to do. However, a little reflection on hard facts makes it clear that a one-state solution is just as impossible.

A single-state solution would be acceptable to all reasonable minds, but you only have to follow the news to know that Israel contains a good many unreasonable minds. Its early advocates and founders were, quite simply, fanatics, and its policies and attitudes were shaped by that fanaticism.

The Israeli establishment could simply not accept a Palestinian population with equal rights and the franchise as part of Israel. They could not do so because they have embraced an almost mystical concept of Israel as "the Jewish state." Of course, the de facto reality of today's combined population of Israel and its occupied territories is that Palestinians, who importantly include not just Muslims but many Christians, are already about half of the total.

And there are physical realities forming huge barriers against a single state, things of which many people are not aware. Very importantly, fertility rates in Arab populations are considerably higher than in the European Ashkenazi population which forms Israel's elite. That has nothing to do with ethnic characteristics. It is a result of much lower levels of affluence influencing the behavior of people having children. It is a universal reality we see.

That's why Arabic populations are such relatively young populations with a high proportion of children. When Israel bombs a place like Gaza or Lebanon, as it does periodically, it always kills many hundreds of children because they make a big share of the population. An advanced country like Japan has low fertility and traditionally is averse to much migration. It faces a future with an aging and declining population.

All older European and North American countries have fertility rates too low to replace their otherwise declining populations. America or France or Israel or similar states simply do not have enough babies to replace their populations. That's a fundamental reality of advanced, affluent society. People with rich, demanding lives do not have large numbers of children, anywhere, knowing, as they do, that the few they do have will almost certainly survive and will better thrive with more concentrated resources.

That's the real reason behind most countries' immigration policies, not generosity or kindness. But, of course, Israel has a serious problem with immigration, too. As the "Jewish state" it is open to only one category of migrant, and that category of people makes a tiny fraction of the world's population. Further, most of that tiny fraction live in comfortable, affluent places, far more desirable to live in than Israel – places like America, Canada, Australia, Britain, France, etc.

A single-state Israel would combine low fertility Europeans with higher fertility Arabic people, thus creating a long-term trajectory for a minority-Jewish state, a reality which would be repellent to all conservative Jews and many others, in light of the founding notion of Israel as a refuge from believed widespread anti-Semitism, plus the vaguely-defined but emotionally-loaded notion of a "Jewish state," and, still further, the biblical myths of God's having given the land exclusively to Jews.

You simply cannot make rational sense out of that bundle of attitudes and prejudices, yet you cannot get a rational solution to a massive problem otherwise, a problem, it should be noted, of Israel's own deliberate making in the Six Day War. Likely, when Israel's leadership started that war, they calculated that Palestinians would come to feel so miserable under occupation that they'd just pick up and leave over time. Moshe Dayan, one of the architects of the war, actually spoke along those very lines of keeping the Palestinians miserable so they would leave. But their calculations were wrong. Most people, anywhere, do not pick-up and leave their native place. Otherwise the world would a constant whirlwind of migrations.

Although Israel does not discuss the relative population growth rate situation in public, authorities and experts there are keenly aware of the reality. It is difficult to imagine them ever embracing a single state for this reason. When you found a state on ideology and myths, as Israel was founded, you very soon bump up against some unhappy realities.

So, if there is not to be a Palestinian state, what are Israel's other options? There seem to be only two.

One is to deport all or most Palestinians, an ugly idea which is probably also unworkable, although it has very much seriously been discussed among educated Israelis periodically. Apart from the Nazi-like connotations around such an act, who, on earth, is going to take literally millions of people from Israel? In the past, Israeli ideologues have seriously suggested both the country of Jordan and parts of Egypt contiguous with Israel as possibilities.

Can any realistic person believe those states stand ready to take millions of people in? No, of course not, but that hasn't stopped the ideologues of Israel from going back to the idea again and again. Of course, there is the pure ethical problem of moving millions against their wills and seizing all their property, but ethics have not never featured large in Israel's policies from the beginning.

The other solution is to re-create apartheid South Africa's Bantustans, little enclaves of land with often undesirable characteristics into which you crowd all the people that you don't want and declare that these are their new countries. We see this already in Israel, notably in Gaza, which really is a giant refugee camp much resembling a concentration camp with high fences and automated machine-gun towers surrounding it, the residents being permitted almost no freedom of movement or even economic activity, as for example Gaza's fishermen being fired on by Israeli gunboats if they stray even slightly beyond tight boundaries in the sea.

The world would not long tolerate that approach no matter how much influence the United States might unfairly exert. After all, for a long time, the United States protected and cooperated with apartheid South Africa, always regarding it as an important bulwark against communism, anti-communism being the fervent secular religion of the day in America. This was so much the case that it even overlooked what it absolutely had to know about, apartheid South Africa's acquisition of a small arsenal of nuclear weapons with the assistance of Israel, Israel always being keen to keep good access to South Africa's mineral wealth.

Clearly, those two options are not solutions. Realities absolutely demand either a legitimate two-state solution – which Israel's leaders have never truly accepted while giving it time-buying lip-service – or a one-state solution which is probably even more unacceptable to Israel's leaders and much of its population, guaranteeing, as it does, the eventual minority status of Jews.

Israel has itself created a terrible problem which it is incapable of solving. That is why it has always been the case that the United States must pretty much dictate a solution, but it is unable to do so, paralyzed as it is by the heavy influence of Israel and America's own apologists and lobbyists.

So, in effect, the world just goes around and around on this terrible problem, never doing anything decisive. The macabre dance of Israel and the United States we've had for decades yields today's de facto reality of Israel as nothing more but nothing less than a protected American colony in the Middle East, one in which all kinds of international norms and laws are completely suspended, one where millions live with no rights and no citizenship. But, after all,

colonies have never been places where the rule of law and human rights prevail, have they?
Never.