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Israel's medievalism

Calls to send Gaza "back to the Middle Ages" only reinforce Israel's current state of medievalism.

Michael Marder

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Israeli Interior Minister Eli Yishai stated that current operations in Gaza should send it "back to the Middle Ages"

In one of the most brazen and, at the same time, frank declarations to date, the Israeli Minister of the Interior, Eli Yishai **stated** regarding the war currently being waged on the Gaza Strip: "The goal of the operation is to send Gaza back to the Middle Ages. Only then will Israel be calm for forty years." With these words, he revealed much more than the subtext behind the official reasons for the invasion, namely restoring Israel's "deterrence capabilities" and destroying Hamas missile launchers. He also shed light on Binyamin Netanyahu's vision of peace not as a relation among equals but as the calm of the defeated, the vision consistent with the use of war to

bolster the Prime Minister's domestic image as a tough, military leader in a run-up to his likely re-election in January 2013.

Yishai's Biblical allusions to forty years of wandering in the desert are not accidental. After all, his political party, Shas, is the utterly fanatical, religious faction in the Netanyahu government. Its ideal of Israel, too, is not very far from being medieval - a country where men and women would be segregated in public transport as well as in every area of public life, where freedom of religion would be a pipe dream, and where homosexuality would be deemed a plague "**as toxic as bird flu**". In brief, both the domestic and the foreign policies of Yishai's party are based on a venomous mix of anti-modernism, theocracy, religious parochialism, and disrespect for human rights.

All this, however, pales in comparison with the recent call "to send Gaza back to the Middle Ages". With living conditions already precarious in this part of Palestine, on the eve of the possible land invasion of the Gaza Strip, the expression resonates as a horrific threat of razed infrastructure and destroyed houses, mass starvation, and outbreaks of disease. It unmistakably alludes to the barbarity of indiscriminate warfare, where civilian victims are fair game and the Geneva Conventions are blatantly violated. And, above all, it demonstrates the desire to translate the economic and political inequalities between Gaza and the territory that stretches to the North and to the East into insuperable differences, whereby the two populations would no longer inhabit the same historical moment.

The tactic of a temporal "throwback" of the adversary is still more insidious than that of the enemy's sheer dehumanisation. Yishai's statement indicates that Israel is intent on creating facts on the ground not only territorially, ie, by way of continued settlement construction and occupation, but also temporally, by exacerbating the already uneven economic development. While high-tech industry thrives in the Israeli Silicon Valley, Gazans are denied the basic infrastructure necessary for everyday survival. As though the brutal siege of Gaza were not sufficient to cause unspeakable suffering for all those trapped in the collective prison where Israel is the warden, the war would ensure that the 1.7 million prisoners would not have the luxury of living in the twenty-first century. As a result, materially, Israelis and Palestinians would live in two distinct epochs, the post-modern and the pre-modern. Worse yet, the Israeli

postmodernity would be made possible by denying Palestinians the right to usher in political and economic modernity.

Tellingly, the chilling threat made by the leader of Shas was sounded less than two weeks before the scheduled formal presentation of the Palestinian **bid to the UN** to attain the status of a non-member observer state. While statehood is one of the most recognisable symbols of political modernity, Israel's ongoing efforts to derail the constitution of an independent Palestinian state are in line with the tactics of sending its neighbour "back to the Middle Ages". The Israeli war on Palestinian modernity is waged on all fronts. Literal bombs destroy economic infrastructure and human lives; diplomatic bombs - the letters and phone calls by Netanyahu to world leaders, **threatening with "consequences"** [SP] in case they vote in support of the UN bid - aim to undermine the symbolic and political infrastructure for a viable state.

When invoked in a negative context, the term Middle Ages is associated with a period of stagnation and, indeed, a retrogression, oblivious to the achievements of the Greek and Roman civilisations. Pejoratively, they are known as "the Dark Ages" - a peculiar construction of the Italian Renaissance and the Age of the Enlightenment that defined their faith in reason and progress in contrast to the ignorance of Middle Ages. Granted, the period was not particularly auspicious for Christian Europe. But the Arab/Islamic science, medicine, philosophy and the arts flourished, as did the Chinese and Indian empires. It is therefore bitterly ironic that the leader of a party calling for an "authentically Middle Eastern" (hence, Sephardi dominated) Israel would resort to this expression to denote a state of backwardness and underdevelopment. And it is particularly absurd that the current war-mongering and intolerant government of Israel would consider itself as the inheritor of the Enlightenment, waging battle against the forces of medieval darkness.

A final nuance should not escape our attention. Yishai did not say that the population of Gaza lived in the Middle Ages. Rather, he called for the spread of medieval darkness on its territory. The strategy is not unheard-of: Dictators prefer to govern by instilling fear and by impeding the social, political, and economic development of their subjects. What this rhetorical move confirmed was Israel's own medievalism, its flagrant disregard of the international legal and political order, where it claims for itself the status of a permanent exception.

