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Why Israel Desires to be Hated by Palestinians

by OREN BEN-DOR
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Yet another massacre is unfolding in Gaza, the largest prison in the world. We are surrounded by familiar chatter: ‘Israel’s right to defend itself’; ‘Palestinians’ legitimate resistance to (the 1967) occupation’; ‘who started it this time?’ Most insidious, however, is the stale refrain, sung by a chorus which includes President Obama, that the violence is disastrous for the ‘peace process’ aimed at a ‘two-state solution’.

While it has been noted that one motivation for the Israeli government, in the run-up to elections in January, is to unite voters behind a ‘no choice’ rhetoric, there is a deeper motivation at stake here – to restrict the horizons of political debate, to control what should be regarded as a litmus test for ‘realistic’, ‘moderate’ and ‘reasonable’ voices.

War is useful because the passion it arouses prevents people from asking two basic questions that must be addressed if the core of silencing and violence that we are witnessing is to be grasped and, in turn, if progress is ever to be made towards justice and enduring peace. First, what kind of state is Israel? Second, who are the Palestinians that this state is in conflict with?

Israel was established to be a *Jewish* state. Its institutions have always been shaped and constrained so as to ensure the continued existence of a Jewish majority and character. Passing a test of Jewishness entitles someone to Israeli citizenship regardless of where in the world she lives. Furthermore, her citizenship comes with a bundle of political, social and economic rights which are preferential to that of citizens who do not qualify as Jewish. This *inbuilt* discriminatory premise highlights the *apartheid* nature of the state. But *apartheid* is not an accidental feature of Israel. Its very creation involved immense injustice and suffering. Shielding and rationalizing this inbuilt premise prevents the address of past injustices

and ensures their continuity into the future. It is a premise that, in matters of constitutional interpretation, takes precedence over, and thus involves the imposition of 'reasonable' limitations on, equality of citizenship.

The Palestinians, we are told, are a people who live in the West Bank and Gaza. The impression forced on us is that the conflict concerns a compromise to be made the correct border between Israel and a Palestinian state. We are led to believe that a *partition* into two-states would satisfy both genuine and realistic aspirations for justice and peace. In this view, the violence in Gaza is just an unreasonable aberration from an otherwise noble peace process.

But Palestinians actually comprise three groups. First, those whose families originate in the territories that were occupied by Israel in 1967 (Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem). Second, the descendants of the approximately 750,000 non-Jews who were ethnically cleansed in 1947-9 in order to ensure a Jewish majority in the new Jewish state. This group is dispersed around the world, mostly in refugee camps in the territories occupied in 1967 and the neighbouring states. Israel has persistently denied them their internationally recognized legal right to return. The majority in Gaza consists of refugees from villages which are now buried under Israeli towns and cities that were created explicitly for Jewish citizens, places which include Ashkelon and Tel Aviv that were hit by rockets in the current conflict. The third group of Palestinians, which Israel insists on calling by the euphemism 'Israeli Arabs', are the non-Jews who managed to evade ethnic cleansing in 1947-49 and who now live as second-class citizens of Israel, the state which likes to claim that it is 'Jewish and democratic'.

Until 1948, the territory of Palestine stretched from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean. The violence that has afflicted the area ever since is the direct result of an event whose true nature our society seems determined to deny. Violence keeps erupting because of the silencing and marginalization of a simple truth surrounding any partition policy: that *the injustice that afflicts Palestine can not be partitioned*. It is *because* of the desire to preserve a Jewish state that first, the legal dualism that exists in the 1967 Occupied Territories as well as the horror at the 'Separation Wall' have become the dominant political discourses of *apartheid*, second, that the refugees are remained dispossessed and, thirdly, that both actual and potential non-Jew Arab citizens do, and would, suffer discrimination. The two-state vision means that the inbuilt *apartheid* within Israel, and in turn the injustice to two groups of Palestinians, does never become the central political problem.

The range of reactions to the current carnage shows just how successful violence has been in sustaining the legitimacy of Israel by entrenching the political focus merely on its *actions* rather than on its *nature*. These reactions keep the discourse that calls for *criticizing* Israel rather than for *replacing* it with an egalitarian polity over the whole of historical Palestine.

Israel desires to be hated by Palestinians. By provoking violence Israel has not merely managed to divert the limelight from its *apartheid* nature. It has also managed to convince that, as Joseph Massad of Columbia University once captured, it has the *right* to occupy, to dispossess and to discriminate, namely the claim that the *apartheid* premise which founds it should be put up with and rationalized as reasonable. Would anybody allow such a right-claim to hold sway in *apartheid* South Africa? How come that the anti-apartheid and egalitarian calls for the non-

recognition of Israel *right* to exist are being marginalized as extreme and unrealizable? What kind of existential fetters cause the world to exhibit such blindness and a drop of compassion? Is there no unfolding tragedy that anticipates violence against Jews precisely because past violence against them in Europe is being *allowed* to serve as a rationalizing device of an *apartheid* state?

Israel has already created a *de facto* single state between the river and the sea, albeit one which suffers from several apartheid systems, one within Israel and another in the occupied territories. We must not let Israeli aggression prevent us from treating as moderate and realistic proposals to turn this single state into one where all would have equal rights.