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The Future of Palestine

The Future of Palestine: Righteous Jews vs. the New Afrikaners

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4/30/2010

There is going to be a Greater Israel between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. In fact, I would argue that it already exists. But who will live there and what kind of political system will it have?

It is not going to be a democratic bi-national state, at least in the near future. An overwhelming majority of Israel's Jews have no interest in living in a state that would be dominated by the Palestinians. And that includes young Israeli Jews, many of whom hold clearly racist views toward the Palestinians in their midst. Furthermore, few of Israel's supporters in the United States are interested in this outcome, at least at this point in time. Most Palestinians, of course, would accept a democratic bi-national state without hesitation if it could be achieved quickly. But that is not going to happen, although as I will argue shortly, it is likely to come to pass down the road.

Then there is ethnic cleansing, which would certainly mean that Greater Israel would have a Jewish majority. But that murderous strategy seems unlikely, because it would do enormous damage to Israel's moral fabric, its relationship with Jews in the Diaspora, and to its international standing. Israel and its supporters would be treated harshly by history, and it would poison relations with Israel's neighbors for years to come. No genuine friend of Israel could support this policy, which would clearly be a crime against humanity. It also seems unlikely, because

most of the 5.5 million Palestinians living between the Jordan and the Mediterranean would put up fierce resistance if Israel tried to expel them from their homes.

Nevertheless, there is reason to worry that Israelis might adopt this solution as the demographic balance shifts against them and they fear for the survival of the Jewish state. Given the right circumstances – say a war involving Israel that is accompanied by serious Palestinian unrest – Israeli leaders might conclude that they can expel massive numbers of Palestinians from Greater Israel and depend on the lobby to protect them from international criticism and especially from sanctions.

We should not underestimate Israel's willingness to employ such a horrific strategy if the opportunity presents itself. It is apparent from public opinion surveys and everyday discourse that many Israelis hold racist views of Palestinians and the Gaza massacre makes clear that they have few qualms about killing Palestinian civilians. It is difficult to disagree with Jimmy Carter's comment earlier this year that "the citizens of Palestine are treated more like animals than like human beings." A century of conflict and four decades of occupation will do that to a people.

Furthermore, a substantial number of Israeli Jews – some 40 percent or more – believe that the Arab citizens of Israel should be "encouraged" to leave by the government. Indeed, former foreign minister Tzipi Livni has said that if there is a two-state solution, she expected Israel's Palestinian citizens to leave and settle in the new Palestinian state. And then there is the recent military order issued by the IDF that is aimed at "preventing infiltration" into the West Bank. In fact, it enables Israel to deport tens of thousands of Palestinians from the West Bank should it choose to do so. And, of course, the Israelis engaged in a massive cleansing of the Palestinians in 1948 and again in 1967. Still, I do not believe Israel will resort to this horrible course of action.

The most likely outcome in the absence of a two-state solution is that Greater Israel will become a full-fledged apartheid state. As anyone who has spent time in the Occupied Territories knows, it is already an incipient apartheid state with separate laws, separate roads, and separate housing for Israelis and Palestinians, who are essentially confined to impoverished enclaves that they can leave and enter only with great difficulty.

Israelis and their American supporters invariably bristle at the comparison to white rule in South Africa, but that is their future if they create a Greater Israel while denying full political rights to an Arab population that will soon outnumber the Jewish population in the entirety of the land. Indeed, two former Israeli prime ministers have made this very point. Ehud Olmert, who was Netanyahu's predecessor, said in late November 2007 that if "the two-state solution collapses," Israel will "face a South-African-style struggle." He went so far as to argue that, "as soon as that happens, the state of Israel is finished." Former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who is now Israel's defense minister, said in early February of this year that, "As long as in this territory west of the Jordan River there is only one political entity called Israel it is going to be either non-Jewish, or non-democratic. If this bloc of millions of Palestinians cannot vote, that will be an apartheid state."

Other Israelis, as well as Jimmy Carter and Bishop Desmond Tutu, have warned that if Israel does not pull out of the Occupied Territories it will become an apartheid state like white-ruled South Africa. But if I am right, the occupation is not going to end and there will not be a two-state solution. That means Israel will complete its transformation into a full-blown apartheid state over the next decade.

In the long run, however, Israel will not be able to maintain itself as an apartheid state. Like racist South Africa, it will eventually evolve into a democratic bi-national state whose politics will be dominated by the more numerous Palestinians. Of course, this means that Israel faces a bleak future as a Jewish state. Let me explain why.

For starters, the discrimination and repression that is the essence of apartheid will be increasingly visible to people all around the world. Israel and its supporters have been able to do a good job of keeping the mainstream media in the United States from telling the truth about what Israel is doing to the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. But the Internet is a game changer. It not only makes it easy for the opponents of apartheid to get the real story out to the world, but it also allows Americans to learn the story that the New York Times and the Washington Post have been hiding from them. Over time, this situation may even force these two media institutions to cover the story more accurately themselves.

The growing visibility of this issue is not just a function of the Internet. It is also due to the fact that the plight of the Palestinians matters greatly to people all across the Arab and Islamic world, and they constantly raise the issue with Westerners. It also matters very much to the influential human rights community, which is naturally going to be critical of Israel's harsh treatment of the Palestinians. It is not surprising that hardline Israelis and their American supporters are now waging a vicious smear campaign against those human rights organizations that criticize Israel.

The main problem that Israel's defenders face, however, is that it is impossible to defend apartheid, because it is antithetical to core Western values. How does one make a moral case for apartheid, especially in the United States, where democracy is venerated and segregation and racism are routinely condemned? It is hard to imagine the United States having a special relationship with an apartheid state. Indeed, it is hard to imagine the United States having much sympathy for one. It is much easier to imagine the United States strongly opposing that racist state's political system and working hard to change it. Of course, many other countries around the globe would follow suit. This is surely why former Prime Minister Olmert said that going down the apartheid road would be suicidal for Israel.

Apartheid is not only morally reprehensible, but it also guarantees that Israel will remain a strategic liability for the United States...

I believe that most of the Jews in the great ambivalent middle will not defend apartheid Israel but will either keep quiet or side with the righteous Jews against the new Afrikaners, who will become increasingly marginalized over time. And once that happens, the lobby will be unable to provide cover for Israel's racist policies toward the Palestinians in the way it has in the past.