

NEW-OLD THINKING ON PALESTINE

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There is a famous Jewish maxim that people tend to look for a lost key where there is light and not where they lost the key. There is a sense that the diplomatic efforts to end the Israel/Palestine conflict were a search for the key where there was light, but not where it was lost. These efforts were based on a certain perception about the origins of the Israel/Palestine conflict and the reasons for its continuation.

This perception regraded the 1967 June war as the starting point for the conflict and hence framed the conflict as a dispute over the future of the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Such a perception reduces Palestine geographically to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (22% of historical Palestine) and the Palestinians to the people living in those two areas. More profoundly, this approach is based on the assumption that the conflict in Israel/Palestine is between two national movements with equal right to the place that need external help to find a compromise. Par this view, an outside mediator should have adopted a business-like approach by dividing between the sides everything which is divisible. This division (in particular that of space) was based on the balance of power hence the stronger party, Israel, always gets more. It is also informed by certain didactical logic: if the weaker party declines the offers of partition than a lesser deal will be offered to it. Hence the Palestinians were offered half of Palestine in 1947, around twenty percent after 1967 and nowadays a bit more than ten percent of their homeland.

This approach collapsed for few reasons. The most important one is the political change inside Israel. Since the beginning of this century the Israeli political system shifted to the right, which means that the electorate and the politicians representing it do not see any urgent need to compromise with the Palestinians over territory or sovereignty. Moreover, there is a consensual support for Israeli unilateral actions as the best means forward to deal with the conflict (and with

that ensure Israel's supremacy in historical Palestine and beyond). Therefore, unlike the previous forces dominating Israeli politics before them (the Israeli Left), the present political leaders are not deterred by the demographic reality in 21st century Israel and Palestine. The vision of a Jewish state in which most of the Palestinians would not have equal rights is a reality many of the Israeli Jews were born into and accept as morally valid and politically feasible. Any Palestinian resistance is framed today in Israel as terrorism and any criticism from the outside is branded as anti-Semitism.

This approach and policy dimmed the dividing line between Israel and the occupied territories. Although there are still differences in the judicial status of Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line, these seem to disappear quickly. The facts on the ground, an on-going Jewish colonization of the West Bank, which includes not just small settlements, but proper urban sprawl, render any idea of a sovereign independent Palestinian state impossible.

Thus in 2019, we are faced with an international community that still sponsors the two-state solution, a fragmented Palestinian leadership losing its legitimacy by the day that adheres as well to this solution, and a diminishing Israeli support for this kind of solution. The real peace effort has been dead for all intents and purposes for a long time.

We are still awaiting, without holding our breath, for Donald Trump's 'Deal of the century' that is supposed to reignite the process. Trump is not going to offer anything American administrations have not offered before. He is in any way more honest about the American role in the Israel/Palestine Question. The previous administrations pretended to be honest brokers in the conflict, but in essence adopted unconditionally the Israeli point of view and disregarded the Palestinian one. In theory, the official positions of the American State Department, until Trump's election, was that the Israeli annexation of Jerusalem and the Jewish colonies in the West Bank were illegal, but in practice nothing was done to challenge the annexation or stop the colonies from expanding. Trump seems to be franker, when he admits openly that the US is not an honest broker and its first priority is to give carte blanche to the Israelis to do whatever they deem right in the Palestine question.

In fact, it is more likely that Trump will desert any meaningful effort to intervene in the Israel/Palestine question. There is also very little chance that another international actor, be it the EU or China, will take its place. The result is stagnation in the peace process and continued Israeli unilateral policies aiming at solidifying the apartheid regime imposed all over historical Palestine.

However, while probably not offering any new idea of how to bring about a two states solution, the people behind the 'Deal of the Century' will go further than any previous international actor

in supporting the right wing Israeli government in establishing new facts on the ground. There is already indication of how this would work. First, came the Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. This is a violation of the international law that regards the city as an international space. And this is why until today most states do not have an embassy in Jerusalem, but only in Tel-Aviv. This was followed with the transfer of the US embassy from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem.

The next step was Trump's recognition of Israel's annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights – another violation of international law and finally strong hints that the US will accept an Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank.

This American policy, together with the Israeli new Nationality Law in the Knesset (in December 2018), means that Israel and the US do not recognize any national rights for the Palestinians in most parts of historical Palestine. The 'Deal of Century' hopes to buy the Palestinian leadership by financial inducements and through that convince them to give up their national struggle for independence and self-determination. It is also meant to defeat the Palestinian struggle for equality inside Israel and for the right of the Palestinian refugees to return. Part of this campaign includes the closing of Israeli archives that in the past contained important documents about 1948 and the Nakba. By closing these historical sources, official Israel wishes to erase the Palestinian history and natural and legitimate claim for return and compensation. It is also an effort to wipe out the Palestinian narrative, that in recent decades, has been legitimized and accepted by many in the civil societies around the world (even if the political elites refuse to do so). This acceptance led to support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Campaign in the civil societies. The movement was founded about ten years ago in response to a call from the Palestinian civil society to the international community to take a more vigorous action against the Israeli policy in Palestine. It identified three basic rights which Israel violates with regard to the Palestinians. The right of the Palestinian refugees to return; the right of the Palestinians who live in the occupied West Bank and the besieged Gaza Strip to live free without been ruled by the Israeli army and the right of the Palestinian minority of Israel for equal citizenship in the state. The support for the BDS tells us that Palestine's future would be determined not only on the ground but also by the results of the struggle between cynical political elites, afraid of facing Israel, and their electorate that demands a moral position towards of the longest modern day conflicts.

The imbalance of power is such that currently one can see no internal or external actors who can this course of action or this unfolding reality. This is a good time for reflection of an alternative way forward, although there are also urgent targets to be met as the situation on the ground deteriorates, in particular in the Gaza Strip. The UN predicted the very soon the Strip will not be inhabitable and therefore we have to be conscious of the need for a short term action and long term thinking.

In the second part of this article I would like to focus on the long term strategy, but once more alert the readers that this does not exclude the need for an immediate action by the international community to stop at least the worst violation of the Palestinians' civil and human rights. In many ways, the BDS movement represents this sense of urgency and the needed orientation for dealing first with the burning issues on the ground before a final vision is conceptualised. One can only hope that this campaign, which has far been effective, will eventually stop at least some of the atrocities on the ground.

In the meanwhile, we should make up for the wasted half of a century of looking for the key where there is the light and not where we lost it. For that to happen we have to recognize the need to revisit the history of the Zionist project in Palestine and adopt a new dictionary that would fit the realities on the ground and the chances for reconciliation in the future.

Unlike the historical analysis informing the two states solution focusing on 1967 and the framing the conflict as one between national movements, an alternative view will go back to the very beginning of the Zionist project. The conflict from this perspective will be framed as one between a settler colonial movement, Zionism, and the native population, the Palestinians. A settler colonial movement in essence is a movement of Europeans outside of the continent looking for a refuge due to religious, cultural or economic persecution. They were looking for one-way journey into foreign lands they hoped to make them their new home and indeed their new homeland. Their main obstacle was the presence of native people in the newly coveted lands. In that moment, as the leading scholar of settler colonialism, Patrick Wolfe, commented, a 'logic of the elimination of the native' is activated. The settlers see the removal of the indigenous population as prerequisite for any chance of succeeding in their project of building a new nation state. In some cases, such in North America, this logic indeed led to physical elimination of the native Americans and the aboriginals in Australia. In other places, the removal meant Apartheid as in South Africa or ethnic cleansing as in Palestine. The methods used by the settler colonial movement in Palestine have changed over time, but the vision of a Jewish Palestine with as few Palestinians as possible has not altered throughout the years.

In 1948, the new Jewish state expelled half of Palestine's population and demolished half of its villages and most of its towns. The 1948 war ended with Israel taking over 78% of Palestine and still half of the population was in its homeland. Until 1967, the main problem was the Palestinian minority that remained inside Israel. They were put under a harsh a military regime which robbed them of their basic human and civil rights. This regime was imposed on the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip after the June 1967 war. The various Israeli plans, some branded as peace proposals, were meant to resolve the contradiction between the wish to take over the land (22% remaining of historical Palestine) while not incorporate into the Jewish State, millions of Palestinians and alter the demographic balance in it. Any Palestinian

resistance was brutally crushed. Neither the Oslo accord of 1993, nor the unilateral withdrawal of Jewish settlers from the Gaza strip in 2005, changed this reality; in fact what was broadcast as steps towards peace, made life even more difficult for the Palestinians.

This history indicates that the issue in Israel/Palestine was and is a struggle between a settler state and the indigenous population. The struggle continues as there are still, and will be, two populations between river Jordan and the Mediterranean. One with privileges and one bereft of any basic rights. The new thinking needs to redress this imbalance. It is clear that the creation of a Bantustan state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip will not do this. It is very difficult to convince people to give up their privileges, but with pressure from the outside and clear vision from the Palestinian side might convince a minority inside the Jewish society in Israel that this is the only way forward, otherwise they might find themselves on wrong side of history. To be on the right side of history means consenting to live as equal citizens with the native Palestinians all over historical Palestine and rectifying the evils of the past through the return of the refugees, dismantling the colonialist institutions such as the Jewish National Fund and redistributing the wealth of the country. It was possible do it elsewhere, there is no reason not to envisage as the future for everyone living in Israel and Palestine, and for those who were expelled from there.

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