

Political and Social Recomposition in Israel and Palestine

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When taking stock of 2008 with regard to the conflict between Israel and Palestine or, more specifically, between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs (which more accurately reflects the two sides of the issue), it is necessary to engage in an analytical exercise that harbours a certain paradox: on the one hand, the conflict appears to be frozen; on the other, some of its variables have dramatically changed. An example of the former would be the feeling that 2008 ended (and 2009 has continued) with 'more of the same'. In other words, it is not that nothing is happening, but rather that what is happening has already been witnessed by international opinion many times over. The transition from 2008 to 2009 will be forever marked by the Israeli attack on Gaza, whose horrifying outcome is well known, and the ensuing political debates, in particular at the international level. An example of the latter would be the sort of general consensus that, whilst Obama's election as president of the United States is an historical watershed (another 2008 milestone), one way or another the conflict discussed herein will put him to a very demanding test. Indeed, the whole world agrees that if anyone can decisively influence the Israeli Government, it is the United States. Whether the Obama administration will try to exert this influence sooner or later has yet to be seen. However, looking back on the first one hundred days of his presidency, it seems unlikely that Obama will continue to pursue the same strategies as his predecessor. It would be the only domestic or international issue where that would be the case.

The Conflict and Its Social Basis: 2008 in Perspective

However, the key question lies elsewhere. Generally speaking, the conflict is almost invariably approached in terms of governmental actors, international policy and similar parameters. We thus risk losing sight of a very different, yet crucial variable on which policy is built, namely: the sociological changes taking place in the societies – Israeli and Palestinian – that are party to the conflict. It is impossible to determine future prospects without first understanding the evolution (continuities and changes) of these societies. From that viewpoint, if we put 2008 in perspective (including some data from early 2009), the results are worrisome. This is because all identified negative trends seem to have been heightened, such that the current conditions for possible (and, in any case, critical) consensus regarding a negotiated solution between the parties are further than ever from the indicators of the nineties (more specifically, from the 1993-2000 period, encompassing the peace process stemming from the Oslo Accords). For example, in February 2009, in relation to the Israeli elections and despite the fragmented and unstable outcome thereof, 85% of Israel's Jewish citizens fully supported the attack on Gaza, without any significant nuances. It is nothing new for such a small country to have a five-party coalition government or a dozen parties in parliament: since 1992, there have been coalition governments (both Labour and Likud) consisting of up to seven parties, some with just one or two MPs and a matching number of ministers! What is new is the lack of social and political division regarding the conflict and the nearly full backing given to the refusal to attempt any sort of negotiated solution, a stance which, paradoxically, ensures that everything will remain the same as in recent years, with a tendency to get worse.

This is important, since, from the Israeli perspective, the current situation did not begin now, with the attack on Gaza at the end of the year. The social consensus on the hardening of Israel's stance, or, if you prefer, its distancing from the principle of negotiation as understood in the nineties, has undergone three phases: the second Intifada broadly speaking (from 2000 to 2005), the rise of Sharon and his policy of unilateral disengagement, that is, the Wall, and the continuation of the policy of constant growth of the settlements in the West Bank (with the manoeuvre of the pseudo-withdrawal from Gaza).

This runs parallel to the evolution of Palestinian society, which can likewise be summarised in three key moments that define the current legacy of the breakdown of the Oslo peace process: the death of Arafat in late 2004, the elections (presidential and parliamentary) of 2005 and 2006, and the ensuing Palestinian civil war, which, by mid-2007, had led to a de facto partition of the Palestinian territories, with Gaza remaining under Hamas's power and the West Bank under Fatah's and the secular parties of the Palestinian political spectrum.

Social Fractures and Political Consensus: Israel

Contemporary Israeli society has changed more over the last fifteen years than it did between the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 and the early nineties. To understand what is happening now, one must bear in mind the social fragmentation of these last fifteen years, a fragmentation which, as will be seen below, increasingly emerges around parliamentary elections and which, at the same time, is apparently masked by a complete political consensus on taking a hawkish approach to security issues. Many experts, Israelis among them, agree that Israeli Jewish society has veered 'to the right', both socially and politically, as well as, and above all, regarding the conflict with the Palestinians. Compared to the thirty-year hegemony of Labour and other parties from the Israeli left, or to the fact that, for years, the main secular parties from both the left and right occupied more than eighty per cent of the electoral space, Israel has changed.

At the same time, it is instructive to examine the social components of the Israeli political system as it stands at the turn of the century. It could be argued that, on the face of it, this is less necessary for Israel than for the Palestinians. Because Israel is a state, with a struc-

turally stable political system predominated by the mechanisms of the rule of law (separation of powers, political pluralism, open and competitive elections, etc.), the impact these components have on the conflict is more readily visible in public decisions and institutions (the Government, the Supreme Court, the General Staff of the Israeli Defence Forces, etc.). However, precisely because it is a representative democracy, the trends toward heterogeneity, disintegration and fragmentation make Israeli Jewish society a decisive variable in the problem.

In any event, mention should be made of at least some key factors behind this fragmentation.

First, Israel is a relatively young state (founded in 1948), which emerged and developed under highly exceptional circumstances: several wars, a hostile environment (or one perceived as such), uncertain borders (for whose uncertainty Israel is now exclusively responsible), changing but steady immigration flows as a main population driver, difficulties consolidating a common civic culture (unbound by theocratic constraints) and other paradoxes.

Second, over time, its civil society has grown less, rather than more, cohesive. From 1948 to 1973, the internal cohesion of Israel's Jewish society was regarded as one of its main assets. Since the invasion of Lebanon in 1982, this cohesion has entered into decline, compounded by the first Intifada, the contradictory effects on civil society of the peace process launched in 1993, the additional factor, relatively unknown outside the country, of the massive immigration from the former USSR in the nineties and, above all, the second Intifada.

Third, Israeli society is divided into five more or less equal social blocks, which are partially, albeit unpredictably, reflected in the party system.

As seen above, one fifth consists of Israeli Arabs. Their loyalty to the political system is subject to several determinants and obligations that there is no need to go into here; however, tensions are growing, as seen in the serious clashes in the city of Acre in late 2008. Whilst, as citizens, and in exchange for certain mechanisms of social marginalisation, they are afforded the same civil and political rights as any other Israeli citizen, this fifth of Israeli society underscores the main contradiction of the State of Israel insofar as its adhesion to the rule of law. As Israel does not have a written constitution (which is not, in itself, an insurmountable obstacle: the United Kingdom likewise lacks one), the separation of church and state is unclear. This leads to significant interference with

individual freedoms. There is only one possible way to put an end to this debate, which has been simmering in Israel for some time now: to clarify the definition of Israeli citizenship constitutionally, irrespective of one's religious and/or supposedly ethnic identity. The other blocks also pose structural problems.

The second fifth is comprised of the approximately one million Russians (more accurately, Jews or alleged Jews from the former Soviet Union) who, in less than ten years, have built up a formidable lobby, including their own parties in Parliament and client relationships with the major parties, which have generally allowed them, since 1992, to form part of the government. Their sudden incorporation into Israeli society poses problems for integration, civic culture and religious observance. They are perceived as newcomers and foreigners and, indeed, such a massive migratory influx in so little time had not been seen since 1948.

The third fifth, the most well known, is that of the observant Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews, who have three large parties, a proportional number of seats in Parliament and a completely disproportionate influence over the government in a society where 75% of the population is non-practicing.

The final two blocks are the classic fifths. The first is a block of secular right-wing citizens (from the centre right, right and extreme right), of which Sharon was the perfect paradigm. The second is a block of secular left-wing citizens (Labour, the radical Zionist left, human rights groups, Peace Now, etc.), who were once equal in number to those on the right but today are in decline. It should be noted that for the first forty years of Israel's history, these two blocks, with their respective political parties, held more than three quarters of the seats in Parliament and governed alone or in small coalitions with a religious party.

Political Fracture and Social Consensus: The Palestinian Case

On the Palestinian side, the situation is grave. On the one hand, the asymmetry of the parties to the conflict has increased since 1948 and, above all, since the Oslo peace process. The fragmentation of the territory, the economic and social hardships, the expansion of the settlements, etc., have given rise to a dramatic panorama that fits into Israel's strategy of providing incentives for individual Palestinians to leave on the condition that they not return (this is

particularly true in the case of the Christian Palestinian population and Jerusalem).

The Palestinian population is moreover subject to an imposed chronic social fragmentation that is in no way derived from partisan options. The latest fragmentation is due to intra-Palestinian political confrontations regarding the 2005 and 2006 elections and the ensuing confrontation between Hamas and Fatah, which, paradoxically, resulted in the partition of a territory (the Palestinian one) that is not sovereign and which neither faction actually controls.

This chronic, inherited fragmentation continues to play a decisive role in the future of Palestinian society.

Additionally, those Arabs who, at the end of the first war in 1948, did not go into exile and were not expelled by Israeli troops, a group primarily found in Galilee, the Negev, Jaffa and Ramle, today comprise 20% of the Israeli population and make up an approximately proportional part of the Israeli electorate. This group finds itself in a delicate situation. They are Israeli citizens with (in theory) full civil and political rights. Their freedom of movement may not be more limited than that of other citizens. They have Arabic-language newspapers and radio stations, as well as Arabic schools and family law, etc., and their own MPs (there are three Arab parties with parliamentary representation). However, their fundamental problem is twofold. First, they face a problem of loyalty with regard to the national causes that they must obey (the Israeli political system) and/or embrace (Arab nationalism in general and Palestinian nationalism in particular). Second, their relationship with regard to both Jewish society and the Palestinians from the occupied territories, who live under much harsher and adverse conditions, is not easy.

Then there are the Palestinians who, in 1967, at the end of the Six-Day War, remained in the territories that Israel occupied and ultimately annexed. These are basically the Palestinians who, since 1967, have lived in greater Jerusalem, the municipality that the Israelis created after occupying the entire city, multiplying the original municipal area by twelve to its current limits. Unlike the group discussed above, these inhabitants are not Israel citizens; rather, under the Entry into Israel Law (1952), Israel considers them to be foreigners with permanent residence in Israel. They are entitled to vote in municipal elections, but have boycotted them since 1967 so as not to legitimate the city government and, above all, not to legitimate the unilateral proclamation of Jerusalem as the 'unified and eternal' capital of Israel.

This group consists primarily of Palestinians from the totally or partially occupied territories that have not been formally annexed and that, therefore, lay at the centre of the 'land for peace' process negotiated between 1993 and 2000. Some 3.5 million Palestinians live in these territories (the West Bank and Gaza), but the continuity of the territory has been severely curtailed and interrupted by more than 200 Jewish settlements. These Palestinians are the worst off, particularly since the conclusion of the peace process (or, more accurately, the negotiated process), not just economically and socially, but also with regard to their freedom of movement and political conditions. However, they are also the engine and troops of the resistance to the occupation.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, at the social level, the conflict is underpinned, as is well known, by an element of continuity, despite the intifadas and peace processes, the road maps and other assorted plans, namely: the asymmetry of power between the parties and the strategy of territorial dispossession, which has been constant since 1967 and, in particular, since 1980, and which consists of expropriations, settlements, home demolitions, etc. The newspaper *Haaretz* recently published (see *Le Courier International*, No. 963, 2009) an article based on an Israeli military intelligence report, which cited the following figure: in 1993, when the Oslo peace accords were signed, there were 120,000 settlers in the occupied territories and 160,000 in East Jerusalem. That is, there were nearly 280,000 Israelis in settlements considered illegal under international law. In 2006, there were 270,000 settlers in the territories and 200,000 in East Jerusalem, despite Oslo, despite the Road Map and despite Annapolis (who remembers that?). This strategy of territorial dispossession is believed to be derived from two strategic considerations: the use of the time factor to change the situation on the ground in favour of a new *status quo* and the support of the Israeli Jewish population for the perception of the Wall as a means of unilaterally guaranteed security.

According to the data, in 1948, Palestinians owned 87% of the land in the historic Palestine under British mandate, equal to a surface area of 26,000 km²; beginning in about 1900, Jews had purchased 7% of this land; under Ottoman law, which the British did not modify, the rest of the land was for public use. Since the Six-Day War, Israel has confiscated some

70% of the current occupied territories: approximately 30% for military needs, 20% for security reasons (including, for example, the building of exclusive roads to connect settlements amongst themselves whilst avoiding Palestinian towns), 10% for green areas that cannot be developed, and 12% because the owners were absent or could not be found. From this perspective, what kind of Palestinian state will be viable?

The fourth group of Palestinians with a separate legal status is the Palestinian diaspora, which can be divided into two groups: refugees and residents in other countries. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), the Palestinian diaspora consists of 3.5 million Palestinians spread out around the world and, in particular, in Arab countries. This diaspora constitutes approximately half of the entire Palestinian population.

As seen above, the conclusion is clear. Nuance, resignation and commitments aside, the social attitudes of both sides have changed dramatically since the nineties. The notion of short-term political expectations has been eroded. One side, the Israeli Jews, has socially barricaded itself behind the paradoxical conviction that it continues to face what it calls an 'existential threat' and that time is on its side (i.e., by indefinitely postponing the creation of a Palestinian State). The other side must overcome the civil confrontation arising from the incompatible agendas of the different sectors of its political class and try to survive. Its scepticism regarding the very idea of politics is already huge.

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