

Israel: A *Cul de Sac* State 2007

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2007 was predicated by the Lebanon fiasco of the previous summer. An ill-fated and ill-prepared military operation, allegedly to retrieve two soldiers kidnapped by the Hezbollah, has left Beirut and southern Lebanon in ruins, and devastated social and economic life in much of northern Israel. There was a small number of military and civilian casualties on the Israeli side, compared to the human loss wreaked in Lebanon, but it was a high price to pay in Israeli terms.

In the year 2007, the Israeli public waited for the conclusion of a commission on inquiry, which at the end of the day proved too timid to dare accuse the Heads of the State and of the army of unnecessarily dragging Israel and Lebanon into a military confrontation resulting in the death and injury of thousands of Lebanese citizens. But the very existence of the commission was powerful enough to cause the General Chief of Staff to resign, but Israel as a political system failed, and in many ways was unable because of its Zionist ideology, to draw any significant lessons from the second Lebanon war. This is why many observers, and this writer included amongst them, are fearful that another Israeli aggression against Lebanon and the Hezbollah is possible.

The fiasco did not cost the Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Olmert, his job. Neither did the endless allegations of corruption in his more distant and more recent past. As this article was going to print, the most serious allegation of corruption (June 2008) has been made against him; this time the dice may have been cast and his political career might come to an end. But as has been the case in post-1967 Israel, a personal change at the top does not mean much in strategic and overall terms. Ever since its creation, the

country's political elite was guided by two principals when faced with the main topic on its agenda: the Palestine question. The first dimension was and is territory or space and the second was and is demography or ethnicity. The drive was to have as much of historical Palestine as possible with as few Palestinians in it as possible.

It was only in 1948 that the young state of Israel had the capabilities to begin to realize this vision. Exploiting the end of the British mandate, the support of the West after the Holocaust, the impotence of the Arab world and disarray in the Palestinian camp the Zionist forces ethnically cleansed half of Palestine's native population and took over almost 80% of the land. In the process, the forces destroyed more than 500 Palestinian villages and a dozen towns.

But Israel needed more space according to its political elite of the years between 1948 and 1967. A reckless Egyptian leader, Jamal Abd al-Nasser, an inexperienced young Jordanian King and a Soviet proxy regime in Damascus all played into the hands of the land hungry Israelis. The pre-emptive Israeli strike of June 1967 was not the only way to solve the crisis of that year. A sensible American-Soviet solution was on its way. But for the Israeli political elite this was a moment of historical opportunity that led to Israeli control over one hundred percent of historical Palestine. It also added a million and a half Palestinians, weakening the wish to have an as ethnically pure Jewish state as possible.

The Israeli government of 1967 decided not to annex the Palestinian territories it occupied in June 1967 but also not to withdraw from them, even for a peace agreement. It also allowed the colonization of large parts of them by Jewish settlers. From then emerged the Israeli formula for how to run the occupied territories which is the main issue on the Israeli political agenda in 2007, and to a certain extent, is also very high up on the world's political agenda.

Since the decision back in 1967 was not to leave the territories, but also to allow its people to remain, the Israelis developed a strategy of a mega prison for the territories. It would be an open prison, where the Israelis would be in full control of its boundaries, land, water and air bridges to the outside world and of movement inside the territories. It would be monitored with the help of a huge network of collaboration and a local municipal elite that would have a large share of autonomy in running the affairs of the people. Working inside Israel, provided the people would commute back into the mega-prison, was also on offer. As the years went by, large sections of the Israeli political system were even willing to call that option of the mega-prison a state. It became popular in particular when Ariel Sharon adopted it as an option in 2001 and was even willing to remove the settlers from the Gaza Strip, so as to make it easier on the one hand for the Palestinians to be autonomous, but on the other, for the Israelis to control the strip from the outside.

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The need for such actions stemmed from the other option in the Israeli strategy: the high security prison one. This developed in reaction to a Palestinian unwillingness to go along with the mega-prison concept. Twice the Israelis offered an open prison option and twice it was rejected. It was offered in the first ten years of occupation and the decision of the Palestinians in 1976 to vote out most of the collaborating municipal authorities and show allegiance to the PLO was seen as a mutinous act by the Israelis, that led to a policy of punitive action in 1981 by the then Minister of Defence, Ariel Sharon, who also tried to destroy the PLO in Lebanon in 1982.

When the mutiny really came, in the form of the First Intifada in 1987, the Israelis put the high security prison option into operation. They resorted to severe and inhumane punitive actions: the demolition of houses, bans on movement, mass arrest without trial, expulsion of people and tight closure of the areas from the outside.

The second time the Israelis tried to offer the open prison option was in 1993, through the Oslo accord. Almost at the last moment, the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, rejected the imposition leading to the Second Intifada of 2000.

The high security prison option was re-activated with new vigour and insights. It was not only a security policy, it was also a diplomatic campaign and political vision. It was devised by the Israeli Prime Minister of 2001, Ariel Sharon, who even founded a political party, Kadima, to help him implement his vision. This was the idea of unilateralism. The argument put to the world was that there is no partner on the Palestinian side with whom to negotiate peace, hence Israel is entitled to decide the occupied territories fate unilaterally.

It was back to the two historical and ideological dimensions I have mentioned: geography and demography. It was time to decide about the space which would finally be Israel and that of the mega-prison. Loyal to ideas he had developed already in the early 1980s, and which he spelled out in the 21st century, Sharon thought that almost half of the West Bank should be annexed to Israel. Not as one territory, but in bits and pieces. The main consideration was to annex the settlements' blocs, the military bases, the "Apartheid" roads, the "national park reserves" (which are no-go areas for Palestinians), the water resources and the Jordan valley.

The annexation was almost over by 2007. All these annexed purely Jewish entities cut the West Bank into 11 small cantons and sub cantons. They are today all separated from each other by this complex, colonialist Jewish presence. The most important part of this encroachment is the greater Jerusalem wedge that divides the West Bank into two discrete regions with no land connection for the Palestinians.

Part of this unilateral complex is the wall and separation barrier, built in 2001. There are walls and fences between Israel and the West Bank, but many more inside the West Bank which are used to encircle individual villages, neighbourhoods or towns. There are differences between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The two geopolitical entities are shaped differently: the West Bank is made of small ghettos and the one in Gaza is a huge mega ghetto of its own. There is another difference: the Gaza Strip is now officially perceived by the Israelis as the ward where the "most dangerous inmates" are kept. The West Bank, on the other hand, is still run as a huge complex of open air prisons in the form of normal human habi-

tations such as a village or a town interconnected and supervised by a prison authority of immense military and violent power.

As far as the Israelis are concerned the mega-prison of the West Bank can be called a state. When Yasser Abd Rabou in the last days of February 2008, threatened the Israelis with a unilateral declaration of independence, inspired by recent events in Kosovo, it seemed that nobody on the Israeli side objected to the idea very much. This is more or less the message a bewildered Abu Ala received from Zipi Livni, Israel's Foreign Minister, when he phoned to assure her that Abd Rabou was not speaking in the name of the Palestinian Authority (PA). He got the impression that her main worry was in fact quite the opposite: that the PA would not agree to call the mega-prisons a State in the near future.

This unwillingness, together with Hamas's insistence on resisting the mega-prison system through a war of liberation forced the Israelis to rethink their strategy towards the Gaza Strip. It transpires that not even the most cooperative members of the PA are willing to accept the mega-prison reality as "peace" or even as a "two states settlement." And, already in 2006, Hamas and Islamic Jihad even translated this unwillingness into Qassam attacks on Israel. So the model of the most dangerous ward developed: the leading strategists in the army and the government braced themselves for a very long-term "management" of the system they had built, while pledging commitment to a vacuous "peace process," with very little global interest in it, and a continued struggle from within, against it.

In 2007, the world witnessed at close hand what were the implications of the new Israeli strategy towards the Gaza Strip. Since it is regarded as the most dangerous ward in the mega-prison complex, it is the object of most brutal punitive action on the part of the prison authority. These actions include killing the "inmates" by aerial or artillery bombing, strangling the population by economic means and closing the Strip hermetically to the outside world. These punitive actions are not just the inevitable results of the mega-prison concept, but also a desirable one. Also the Palestinian rockets launched against Sderot, a southern development town bordering on the Gaza Strip, which became a frequent sight, serves the logic of the mega-prison. In 2007, all the Israeli generals, who were interviewed about the counter-military actions the army could take against the Qassam missiles, admitted that there was no adequate

military solution. But they insisted on the importance, nonetheless, of a continued Israeli policy of retaliation. In other words, the punitive action can not destroy the resistance but it does give an opportunity for retaliation. The retaliation in its turn provides the logic and basis for the next punitive action, should someone in the domestic public opinion doubt the wisdom of the new strategy.

In the near future, any similar resistance from parts of the West Bank mega-prison would be dealt with in a similar way. And these actions are very likely to take place in the very near future. Indeed, the Third Intifada is on its way and the Israeli response would be a further elaboration of the mega-prison system. Downsizing the number of "inmates" in both mega-prisons would be still a very high priority in this strategy by means of ethnic cleansing, systematic killings and economic strangulation.

But there are wedges that prevent the destructive machine from rolling. It seems that a growing number of Jews in Israel (a majority according to a recent CNN poll) wish their government would begin negotiations with Hamas. A mega-prison is fine, but if the residential areas of the wardens are targets and are likely to come under fire in the future then the system fails. Alas, I doubt whether the CNN poll represents accurately the present Israeli mood; but it does indicate a hopeful trend that vindicates Hamas's insistence that Israel only understands the language of force. But it may not be enough and in the meantime, the perfection of the mega-prison system continues unabated and the punitive measures of its Authority are claiming the lives of many more men, women and children in the Gaza Strip.

In 2007, the Israeli government was trying to convince world public opinion that the violence raging in Gaza was the making of a fanatic Islamic ideology and that the Israeli actions against it should be perceived as part of the overall global "war against terror." The Israeli Foreign Ministry, aided by military intelligence, worked hard to show that Hamas and Islamic Jihad were agents of either al-Qaeda or of Iran. The mini civil war that erupted in 2007 between Hamas and Fatah was also presented in such a way.

But the origins of the mini civil war lie elsewhere. The recent history of the Strip, 60 years of dispossession, occupation and imprisonment, inevitably produced internal violence such as we witnessed in 2007. That same history produced other unpleasant features of life lived under such impossible conditions. In fact, it would be fair to say that the violence, and

TOWARDS PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: ADDRESSING CONCERNS AND EXPECTATIONS

On the 11th-12th January 2007, the Toledo International Center for Peace, Search for Common Ground and the Tres Culturas Foundation organize the commemoration for the fifteenth anniversary of the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference. "Madrid +15: Towards Peace in the Middle East addressing concerns and expectations," is a civil society initiative which brings together influential figures from the parties of the conflict and other relevant actors in order to assert the need for a regional approach to peace and stability in the Middle East.

Delegations from Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Syria, United States, Lebanon, Palestine and Russia, besides Foreign Affairs Ministers from Spain, Norway, Denmark and Sweden, the Secretary General of the Arab League and the EC Commissioner for ENP take part in the event.

Participants agree in supporting a comprehensive regional approach which is considered the only way towards a sustainable solution for the Middle East. The 2006 summer crisis in Lebanon, the continually difficult Israeli-Palestinian relations, the war and post-war in Iraq and the emerging regional influence of Iran underline the inter-relation and inter-connection characterizing the issues of the region. In this sense, Commissioner Ferrero Waldner stresses the need to address all components of all conflicts in the region thus being impossible to disentangle one conflict from another: a comprehensive peace should not be limited to Israel and Palestine but must include Lebanon and Syria. The solution cannot be imposed externally but rather come from the parties.

To this extent, the role of the European Union should be of a facilitator, an instigator as well as the role of the Quartet and of the Arab League. The Secretary General of the Arab League, Amr Moussa analyses merits and shortcomings of the Madrid conference in 1991: on one side it gave new dynamism for talks among Middle East parties adopting a comprehensive approach, and establishing the principle of land for peace. But on the other side it excluded the United Nations, it lacked of a follow-up mechanism to redirect the process. He also stresses that the success of peace is a pre-requisite for winning the fight against terrorism.

The Madrid +15 meeting has represented an opportunity to reflect on the successes but also failures of the Madrid process and following steps of the Middle East Peace Process. According to the conclusions of the conference, participants agree in praising the chance to have had a frank debate on concerns, constraints and opportunities between Israel, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine and reaffirming the necessity of a regional approach as emerging from the Arab League Peace Initiative. Participants also reassert a clear sense of urgency discouraging interim agreements or long term agreements while calling for an immediate return to negotiations to reach a final and comprehensive regional agreement.

For further information:
www.toledopax.org/Madrid+15.pdf

in particular the internal violence, is far less than one would have expected given the economic and social conditions created by the genocidal Israeli policies ever since 2000.

Power struggles among politicians, who enjoy the support of military outfits, is indeed a nasty business that victimizes the society as a whole. Part of what went on in Gaza in 2007 was such a struggle between politicians who were democratically elected and those who found it hard to accept the verdict of the people. But this is hardly the main struggle. What unfolded in Gaza was a battle between America's and Israel's local proxies – most of whom are unintentionally such proxies but nonetheless they dance to Israel's tune – and those who oppose it. The opposition that won the day in 2007 and took over Gaza did it alas in a way that one would find very hard to condone or cheer. It is not Hamas' Palestinian vision that is worrying, but rather the means it has chosen to achieve it that we hope would not be rooted or repeated. To its credit one should openly say that the means used by Hamas are part of an arsenal that enabled it in the past to be the only active force that at least tried to stop the total destruction of Palestine; the way it was used in 2007 was less credible and hopefully temporary.

But one cannot condemn the means if one does not offer an alternative. Standing idle while the American-

Israeli vision of strangling the Strip to death, cleansing half of the West Bank of its indigenous population and threatening the rest of the Palestinians – inside Israel and in the other parts of the West Bank – with transfer, is not an option. It is tantamount to "decent" people's silence during the Holocaust.

Much depends on the international reaction. When Israel was absolved from any responsibility or accountably for the ethnic cleansing in 1948, it turned this policy into a legitimate tool for its national security agenda. If the present escalation of Israeli punitive actions against the Palestinians is tolerated by the world, they will expand and use those actions even more drastically.

Nothing apart from international pressure, like that meted out against South Africa in the heyday of Apartheid, will stop the killing of innocent civilians in the Gaza Strip and Sderot, the demolition of houses in the Greater Jerusalem areas, the ethnic cleansing alongside the Separation wall and fence and the continued imprisonment of more than 10,000 Palestinians without trial, many of them children. There is nothing we can do against it here in Israel. Brave pilots refused to partake in the operations, two journalists – out of 150 – do not cease to write about it, but this is it. In the name of the Holocaust memory, let us hope the world will not allow the carnage in Palestine to continue.