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Politicide: Ariel Sharon and the Palestinians

BARUCH KIMMERLING

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s political troubles began a year and a half ago when a mainly grassroots movement rose up inside Israel and demanded construction of a barrier around major Israeli urban centers. Supporters of the fence—which in some strategic locations such as Jerusalem is being built as a wall—hoped it would prevent suicide bombers from entering Israel. The settlers and most of the Israeli far right opposed the fence because it could create an implicit border that would, in effect, re-partition Palestine and leave many settlements outside of its boundaries. It would also, many feared, mean the end of the “Greater Israel” ideology. Most of Sharon’s cabinet and his fellow Likud party members in the Knesset and the party’s central committee strongly opposed the project.

Supporters of the wall were motivated less by ideology than by anxiety about the Palestinian suicide bombings of civilians that the Israeli military seemed unable to prevent. Sharon, however, saw advantages in separation or “disengagement,” a tactical initiative that included not only the construction of the security barrier in the West Bank but also the withdrawal of troops and the dismantling of settlements in the Gaza Strip as part of a presumed master plan.

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Despite losing a Likud party referendum in May, the prime minister has managed to keep his plans on track, in part with support from the opposition Labor party.

TWO ZIONISMS

The recent split between Sharon and his core constituency is not surprising. Sharon’s “school” of Zionism—Labor Zionism—is the historical rival of Romantic Revisionist Zionism, which is the historical ancestor of the ruling Likud party. Revisionist Zionists envisioned the establishment of a Jewish state within the borders of Greater Israel (including what is today the territory of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan) without specifying how this aim should be achieved or how to deal with the fate and reaction of the Arab inhabitants of the country and the region. The basic assumption of the Revisionist school was that the Jewish people have an incontestable historical and moral right to the entire ancestral land and that this right would be self-implementing.

The approach of Labor Zionists to Jewish nation-building in Palestine was completely different. They believed less in “rights” and more in incrementally established facts on the ground. At the same time they took into consideration the changing local and international balance of power between the Jews and the Arabs as well as between their respective supporters in the international arena. The basic tactic was to acquire by purchase, and later by sword, the maximum amount of territory with the minimal number of Arab inhabitants. Labor Zionism has no fixed or sacred borders but only loosely conceptualized and changeable frontiers. In the Labor Zionist view, the amount of territory under Jewish control is flexible and always subject to a complex combination of the ability to

BARUCH KIMMERLING is a professor of sociology at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He is the author, with Joel S. Migdal, of *The Palestinian People: A History* (Harvard University Press, 2003). This essay expands on an article he wrote for *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

hold on to it while paying attention to political, social, military, and demographic considerations.

This pragmatic and sophisticated approach to the colonization of Palestine was one of the principal causes of the incredible success of the Zionist project, which from the start seemed to be working against all odds. Over the past four decades, the boundaries between the two camps have blurred—Sharon himself, a disciple of Labor Zionism, was elected leader of the rival Revisionist camp—yet the essential distinctions between the approaches remain. An aggressive version of the Labor Zionists' vision underlies Sharon's attempt to resolve the central dilemma of the Israeli state.

ISRAEL'S DILEMMA

Since the 1967 War, Israel has become entangled in an ongoing and deepening existential crisis. The crisis was caused by basic internal contradictions that accompanied the gradual and selective absorption of the occupied Palestinian territories and population into the state. This absorption created an unprecedented economic boom and increased social mobility that obscured the crisis and became a part of it. By opening the borders of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the Israeli labor market was flooded by cheap labor, the Palestinian market was opened up for Israeli products, and Palestinian lands became the target of Jewish colonization.

However, this prosperity was conditioned on the continuing "good behavior" and total cooperation of the Palestinian inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and on their willingness to accept the Israeli policy of fully including them in the Israeli economy but completely excluding them from other spheres of the Israeli state. For nearly an entire generation, the Palestinians accepted these colonial rules, benefiting from relative economic prosperity while enduring the deprivation of most human and civil rights and of the political satisfaction that derives from self-determination, collective symbols, and the exercise of any ethnic and national identity. In effect, both societies became addicted to this deeply asymmetric situation and grew interdependent. Many Israelis and Palestinians who grew up in this anomalous situation see it as natural and find it hard to imagine other kinds of relationships.

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The Israeli colonial system started to crack following the Palestinian popular uprising, or the first Intifada, which began on December 9, 1987, and was mainly characterized by mass demonstrations and stone throwing by youths at Israeli troops stationed within Palestinian cities and refugee camps. Israeli society for the first time began to pay some of the costs of the occupation, not only politically and economically but socially through an altered self-image. The first Intifada was completely crushed, but neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians won a victory or suffered a significant defeat. The second round was an armed uprising that began in September 2000 when it became clear that the Oslo Accords (signed in 1993) would not result in an independent and sovereign Palestinian state. On the contrary, the peace process had perpetuated a worsening economic situation while Israel tried to pacify the Palestinians by attempting to grant

them the satisfaction of imaginary self-rule. The Palestinian economy had already started to deteriorate after the first Intifada, when Israel began importing foreign migrant workers and gave

up cheaper Palestinian labor, which was perceived as unstable and a potential security risk.

Quite apart from the economic interest in the territories, a new complication arose after the 1967 war—namely, the desire of Israeli society, both left and right, to incorporate into the boundaries of the Israel state the perceived historic heartland of the Jewish people in the West Bank without including its Arab residents. A formal annexation would mean that Israel would no longer have a Jewish majority. This contradiction created a built-in crisis, leaving the Israeli state and society unable to make the important political decisions that were necessary to resolve the conflict and also meet domestic challenges—in economic reconstruction, education, welfare, state-synagogue relations, democratization, and the demilitarization of society. As time passed, the crisis became more explicit and the contradictory interests became aligned with political parties and were absorbed into personal and collective identities.

In 1977, when the right-wing nationalist bloc headed by the Likud party (the descendant of the Revisionist party) came to power, its very first act was expected to be the immediate annexation of the

entire West Bank and Gaza Strip, which are regarded as part of the “Land of Israel.” This was, after all, the main plank in the party’s platform and what Menachem Begin, the party’s leader, had advocated when he was in opposition. Annexation of the territories was also the reason why Sharon, promptly after leaving the military in 1973, urged some medium and small right-wing and centrist parties to unite behind the veteran Revisionist leader.

However, except for East Jerusalem and the Syrian (Golan) Heights, no additional territories were formally annexed, even though they were considered the mythical motherland of the Jewish people. The reason for this restraint was the existence of a rapidly growing Arab-Palestinian population in the occupied territories. This population, together with the Arab citizens of Israel, would at once transform the Jewish state into a bi-national entity even if the annexed population was not granted rights of full citizenship, suffrage, and access to social welfare programs. Today, in spite of the unprecedented immigration of more than 1 million non-Arabs (Jews and non-Jews) from the former Soviet Union, the territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River contains about 5 million Jews (and non-Arabs) and 4.5 million Palestinians (Israeli citizens and noncitizens). Current demographic projections indicate that by the year 2020, a total of 15.1 million people will live on the land of historic Palestine, with Jews comprising a minority of 6.5 million.

As a result, two deeply rooted existential anxieties exist within Jewish Israeli political culture. One concerns the physical annihilation of the state, an issue that is frequently used, abused, and emotionally manipulated by many Israeli politicians and intellectuals. The other concerns the loss of the fragile Jewish demographic majority, on which the supremacy and identity of the state rest. In fact, the loss of that demographic majority is seen as a prelude to the physical elimination of the Jewish state. Thus, Israel has found itself in an impossible situation: one patriotic imperative (to possess the sacred land) contradicted by the other patriotic imperative (to ensure a massive Jewish majority on the land).

A large portion of the electorate that twice voted for Sharon—from both Zionist schools—expected him to provide the “proper solution” to these internal existential contradictions. Sharon’s supporters also expected him to address the renewed Palestinian armed resistance against the Israeli occupation following Prime Minister Ehud Barak’s failure in 2000 to negotiate a deal with Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat

at Camp David that would end the conflict or at least its basic threat.

MILITARY MANEUVERS

It is important to stress that until a fundamentalist religious Jew (Baruch Goldstein) carried out a suicide massacre on February 25, 1994, in the Patriarchs’ Cave, a holy place for both the Jewish and Islamic religions, the inhabitants of the occupied territories had been successfully “pacified” by a mixture of carrots and sticks. Goldstein’s aim seems to have been to create a chain of responses that would bring about a stop to reconciliation between Palestinians and Jews—an aim in which he completely succeeded. Twenty-nine praying Muslims were killed and many others wounded. Expressions of Palestinian armed resistance were until then rare and were not supported by the majority of the population. This, in spite of the growing colonization of the West Bank and the obstacles placed by Israeli authorities in the way of internal economic growth and foreign investments.

The Patriarchs’ Cave massacre changed at once this “ideal” relationship and created perceptions of religious warfare. It also triggered a reaction by the Palestinians to their years-long hidden frustration accruing from their national and economic oppression and deprivation. After 40 days (the mourning period in Islam), Hamas and other Palestinian religious groups began their vendetta campaign against the Jewish civilian population inside Israel. This was, more than the formally acknowledged start of the second Intifada in 2000, the real beginning of the most recent uprising and of the escalating chain of mutual violence.

The use of suicide bombers (“martyrs” in Palestinian conceptions) was initially perceived as a successful response to the immense disparity in the balance of power between the Israeli military regional superpower and the powerless Palestinians. The early success was so great that the mainstream Fatah militias (and especially the Al Aksa Martyrs Brigades) were forced to join in with these kinds of guerrilla operations. This was a result not only of the panic and demoralization that the suicide bombings caused among Israelis; it also reflected Fatah’s growing awareness of the possibility of losing Palestinian internal political support to the Islamists. However, there were two unintended and unexpected consequences of the suicide bombing warfare. The first was the collapse of the Israeli mainstream peace camp, which went beyond Barak’s declaration, after the failure of the Camp

David talks, that there was “no Palestinian partner” for peace making. The second unintended consequence was the growing internal and international legitimacy of military force, including excessive force, against the whole Palestinian people.

In 2001, the newly elected Sharon had his own idea about how to “solve the Palestinian problem.” His was a concept dating to the 1948 war—namely, to commit politicide against the Palestinians. The process of politicide, in addition to breaking the Palestinians’ political identity and institutions, may also (but not necessarily) include their gradual, partial, or complete ethnic cleansing from the territory known as the “Land of Israel,” or historic Palestine, as was attempted during the 1948 war.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the mainstream peace camp tried to solve Israel’s demographic dilemma by giving up most of the occupied Palestinian territories together with their inhabitants. Rabin was assassinated because of this suggested policy. During subsequent elections, a majority of the Jewish population expressed a rejection of, or at least ambivalence toward, Rabin’s solution, which was regarded as a deviation from the Labor Zionist approach. Sharon’s governments opted almost explicitly for a reversal of the approach encapsulated in the Oslo Accords.

During the first night of Passover, on March 27, 2002, a suicide bomber murdered 29 people and wounded 150 others who were attending a Seder, the ritual Passover meal, at a small hotel in the coastal town of Netanya. Two days later, Israel called up many of its reserve units and declared the start of a series of extensive military operations. The operations had been planned long before, but the suicide attack, which had stirred domestic and world public opinion, provided the perfect pretext for beginning the process of politicide against the Palestinian people. The first phase was military. It started with “Operation Defensive Shield” on March 29, 2002. The objective was to dismember any organized Palestinian security forces and obliterate the internal foundations of the authority of Arafat’s regime. At the same time, and for the same purpose, Israel also systematically attacked most of the Palestinian national and public institutions and infrastructure, even destroying databases like the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics. There is no doubt that every state has a firm obligation to protect its citizens from indiscriminate terrorist attacks and killings. Sharon, however, has used this obligation to legitimate Israel’s own prosecution of state terror, in actions that have gone far beyond self-defense.

The frequent and deep incursions into and sieges of Palestinian towns, villages, and refugee camps—along with the extrajudicial executions of the Palestinian military and political leadership—were intended to demonstrate to the Palestinians Israel’s military might and its readiness and political ability to use it. The aim was to prove to the Palestinians that they are vulnerable and defenseless against any Israeli aggression. The Arab states and the international community paid only lip service to the defense of the Palestinians, mainly to silence internal unrest, because they suspected the present Israeli government of harboring a penchant for regional war.

And under the umbrella of President George W. Bush’s administration—whose spirit lies close to Christian fundamentalism—Israel is considered (as it has never been before) a moral and political extension of the United States. In this capacity, it enjoys, for the time being, the almost unconditional military and political support of the world’s hegemonic megapower.

POLITICAL “DISENGAGEMENT”

During the military stage of the politicide, Sharon gained immense popularity among many Israeli and non-Israeli Jews. Then, after destroying almost any organized Palestinian capability to resist, Sharon came to the political phase of his politicide project, namely the “disengagement” plan. Sharon is pragmatic. He is aware that changing international norms will not accept either large-scale ethnic cleansing or the transformation of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan into a Palestinian state, in accordance with his initial approach that “Jordan should be the Palestinian state.” Therefore, his plan was to dismantle all the Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and four isolated small settlements in the West Bank. In exchange for pulling 9,500 settlers out of the Gaza Strip, Sharon requested that President Bush and the Likud party support retention of the major Jewish settlement blocs, inhabited by about 300,000 settlers in the West Bank.

Sharon expressed a clear “vision” regarding the management of the conflict. He said that, with the implementation of the road map—the Bush administration’s initiative on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—Israel would create a Palestinian state on a contiguous area of territory in the West Bank, which would allow Palestinians to travel from Jenin to Hebron without passing through any Israeli roadblocks or checkpoints, but separated by walls and fences from Israel and the Jewish settlement blocs.

The contours of this vision are obvious enough: the Palestinian “state” would be formed by four or

five enclaves around the cities of Gaza, Jenin, Nablus, and Hebron that lack territorial contiguity. In pursuit of this aim, the border fence would enclose all the major settlement blocs (about 60 settlements)—including many that lie deep inside Palestinian territory, such as Kiryat Arba, the settler town near Hebron. The fence, when and if completed, would result in the de facto annexation of 20 percent of the West Bank. Additionally, it was suggested that Israel would retain, fenced or unfenced, the Jordan Valley up to a narrow strip about 10 kilometers west of the Jordan River. The fenced area includes a large cluster of Arab communities, and the barrier would completely close them off in an enclave that would separate them from other Palestinian territories, contradicting even the presumed “security logic” of the fence for keeping Arabs outside Israel. The plan to connect the Palestinian enclaves with tunnels and bridges means that there will be a strong Israeli presence in most other areas of the West Bank, comparable with the Gaza Strip, where Israel, after the supposed “disengagement,” will retain control over access to the territory by land, air, and sea.

Dov Weisglass, Sharon’s close aide and envoy, divulged in an interview with the newspaper *Ha’aretz* the true intent behind the plan. He admitted that “the disengagement is actually formaldehyde. . . . It supplies the amount of formaldehyde that is necessary so there will not be a political process with the Palestinians. . . . When you freeze that process, you prevent the establishment of a [genuine] Palestinian state, and you prevent a discussion on the refugees, the borders, and Jerusalem. Effectively, this whole package called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed indefinitely from our agenda . . . all with a [US] presidential blessing and the ratification of both houses of [the US] Congress.”

On June 30, 2004, the Israeli High Court ordered changes to 19 miles (from a total projected length of 423 miles) of the route of the West Bank barrier. This ruling was made to ease the immense hardships experienced by Palestinians living in the most problematic areas of the fence’s route. However, the Israeli court accepted the wall in principle, and affirmed that “the current route adequately represents Israel’s security requirements” as part of the so-called unilateral disengagement from the Palestinians. As such, the court supposedly provided Israel with legal legitimacy for the entire enterprise. However, the International Court of Justice at The Hague ruled in July 2004 that the entire separation fence contravenes international

law because it is being built on Palestinian land rather than on the “Green Line” separating Israel from the occupied territories. The court’s “legal advisory opinion” stated that the wall should be dismantled and compensation paid to Palestinian owners of property confiscated for its construction. As expected, this nonbinding opinion caused no changes in Israel’s decision to build the fence. Nor did it affect the route, although construction was later slowed down.

THE POLITICIDE PROCEEDS

All of these activities by the Sharon government are designed to lower Palestinian expectations, crush their resistance, isolate them, and make them submit to any “arrangement” suggested by the Israelis under US-led international auspices. Sharon’s various versions of his politicide plan, which are compatible with the pragmatic Labor Zionist approach, are certainly incompatible with the Revisionist and religious messianic dreams of an exclusive Jewish Greater Israel. Nonetheless, the majority of Israeli citizens, according to the polls, support Sharon’s plan, and many abroad are attracted to the public image, reinforced by mass media, of a breakthrough toward a settlement of the conflict.

Many who are oriented toward compromise are presumably aware of Sharon’s real intentions but support his policy anyway—for reasons that sound sophisticated. First, the Israeli casualties suffered from protecting the few settlers of the Gaza Strip were disproportionate to their limited geopolitical importance. Second, dismantling these settlements might become a precedent for dismantling other settlements. Third, there is the hope that Sharon could “convert” to peacemaker and play the role of a De Gaulle (in Algeria) or De Klerk (in South Africa).

Despite Arafat’s corrupt and oppressive regime and his personal limitations as a political leader (contrary to his virtues as guerrilla leader), his recent death harms the Palestinian cause, especially in the short run. Arafat’s personality symbolized the national revival and unity of the Palestinian people. At present, no one can replace him. Even the religious fundamentalist factions never openly challenged his authority. Now, the stresses between the natural rivals—the old and young guards, the locals and the former exiles, the Islamists and the nationalists, and mainly among different local strongmen—are set to become a war of all against all. There is no doubt that if these internal struggles continue to develop, we are headed toward a chaotic situation that will only contribute to the politicide process. ■