



## PALESTINE, ISRAEL, & THE UNITED STATES: REFRAMING THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE

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We are approaching the election season in the United States, and candidates for the White House as well as the Congress are outdoing each other in trying to prove that they have Israel's best interests at heart. Such professions of support for Israel, including its illegal policy of settling Palestinian lands occupied in 1967, range from Republican presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich's infamous denial that Palestinians are a "people" to the more sophisticated utterances espousing a two-state solution that would ensure the incorporation of large blocks of Jewish settlements into Israel and perpetually demilitarize the proposed Palestinian entity leaving it at the mercy of a much stronger Israel. The principal argument made in support of the two-state solution is that it is the only way to prevent the eventual emergence of a Palestinian majority in "eretz Israel" (the land of Israel) and thus a "necessary evil" aimed at preserving Israel's Jewish and democratic character.

These statements reveal the same amnesia toward the root cause of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has informed American policies for the past several decades. The recent debate in the United States surrounding the Palestinian Authority's (PA) attempt at the United Nations (UN) in September 2011 to gain recognition for Palestine as a state, and especially Washington's declaration that it would veto such a resolution if it came up in the Security Council, is a clear demonstration of the Obama administration's surrender in the face of Israeli opposition to the Palestinian move. More importantly it is a refusal

to recognize the conflict's historical roots, which causes American policy to be based on a deliberately shallow understanding of the subject.

The so-called spat between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu during the latter's visit to the United States in May 2011 foreshadowed Washington's stance on the issue of Palestinian recognition by the UN. That exchange ended with Obama's servile speech before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), during which he tried to explain away the differences between Netanyahu and himself by arguing that both had Israel's best interests at heart and that he was only trying to serve those interests better. There was hardly any mention of the Palestinians' suffering under the Israeli occupation and their right to self-determination in his justification of the two-state solution.

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These episodes clearly show how totally American policymakers have bought into the Israeli narrative of the conflict, as well as their unwillingness or inability to question its basic premises. Even those commentators who have criticized Netanyahu's approach have argued from the premise that by failing to reach a two-state

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deal within the very near future and, by implication, not accepting some sort of UN resolution that would confer titular statehood on Palestine, Netanyahu is harming long-term Israeli interests. According to these critics, the prime minister is ignoring the ticking Palestinian demographic time bomb that would soon render Jews a minority in the land between the Mediterranean Sea

and the Jordan River and thereby put paid to the Zionist dream of a Jewish state.

In the ongoing debates between the “de facto annexers” and the “two-staters”, very little attention has been paid to the Palestinians’ rights, their plight under the occupation and in exile, and their search for individual and collective dignity. In the final analysis, Palestinians are seen merely as inconvenient bit players in a narrative centered on the fate of Israel as a Jewish state. Even such opinion molders as Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* who support a two-state solution do so for tactical reasons. Their main objective is to expunge the Palestinians from the Israeli narrative by creating a demilitarized *Filistinostan*, a Palestinian Bantustan (or may be two Bantustans with one in Gaza and one in parts of the West Bank) hemmed in by all sorts of conditions and qualifications that drastically reduce its sovereignty. The ultimate goal of this exercise seems to be not only to remove from Israel the moral stigma of occupation, but also to force the Palestinians to live in a perpetual political limbo while no longer posing a demographic threat to the Israeli state’s Jewish character.

By accepting the Israeli narrative hook, line, and sinker, the United States has become complicit in Israeli violations of international law, which explicitly forbids demographic transformations in occupied lands. In addition, it is rendering itself irrelevant as far as finding a just and durable solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict is concerned. No wonder the Palestinian leadership decided to ask the UN in September 2011 to endorse Palestinian statehood despite American threats to veto such a move. While this veto would deny Palestine full membership in the UN, the General Assembly can be expected to endorse its status as an observer state (and therefore its statehood) with a comfortable majority if and when the issue is brought before it. The move to bring the issue to the General Assembly is stalled for the moment because of American and European pressure and lack of a Palestinian consensus on this issue but is likely to surface again in the near future. One should not forget that Israel bases its international legitimacy on a

similar resolution passed by the General Assembly (*not* by the Security Council) in November 1947. This serves as a model for Palestinian efforts to have a comparable resolution passed by the General Assembly legitimizing the establishment of a Palestinian state.

It is illogical to presume, therefore, that the Palestinians can be forced to desist (except temporarily) from their current strategy. This is especially true because such a resolution is likely to open up the whole issue of Israel's borders by harking back to the boundaries endorsed by the General Assembly in its 1947 resolution recommending the division of Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state. It is also important to remember that in a subsequent resolution adopted in December 1948, the General Assembly resolved that "the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date." With these words, this body clearly endorsed the right of Palestinians forced into exile due to the 1948 Arab-Israeli war to return to their homes in the newly proclaimed state of Israel.

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Obama's endorsement of "land swaps" as part of his vision for a two-state solution is no more than a euphemism for Israel's annexation of major Jewish settlement blocs in the West Bank and yet another display of Washington's unquestioning acceptance of the Israeli narrative. By accepting this argument, he has in effect declared that an occupying power can settle and colonize occupied lands. This suits the settler-colonial mentality of the current Israeli establishment for, despite arguments to the contrary, Israel itself is the product of

settler colonialism with the British mandate over Palestine from 1922 to 1948 acting as its midwife. After all, it was the British, acting on the promise made by Lord Balfour to the World Zionist Organization in 1917, who facilitated Jewish migration from Europe to Palestine and laid the basis of the territory's demographic transformation. At the beginning of the mandate, the Jewish population in Palestine stood at approximately 10 percent; by the end, it had increased to roughly 30 percent.

To many Israelis, especially on the Right, colonizing the West Bank appears to be no more than a natural extension of the original Zionist strategy of settlement that led to Israel's establishment. They are not inclined to lose any sleep over the fact that such settlements are a major obstacle to peace. One must admit that there is a certain internal consistency to the argument that denying the right of Jews to settle in the West Bank delegitimizes the original Zionist enterprise of colonizing Palestine and, therefore, of Israel itself.

However, it does not behoove the United States to endorse the position that Israel can keep large blocs of Jewish settlements in occupied Palestine, since such an action violates international law and sets a bad precedent. Moreover, such colonization is unacceptable to the large majority of countries, especially to those that have recently emerged from under the yoke of colonialism and indeed, as in the case of South Africa, of settler-colonialism. An American position endorsing Israel's annexation of settler colonies is bound to put it at odds with the majority opinion in the international system.

No one can deny the extent and intensity of Jewish suffering during the past centuries in Europe, which culminated in the Holocaust, one of the greatest atrocities ever committed against a people. The pogroms in central and eastern Europe, which both preceded it and paved the way for it by making the persecution and extermination of Jews acceptable in the eyes of many Europeans, remain a major blot on the history of Christendom side by side with the ethno-

religious cleansing that the Spanish Inquisition inflicted on both Jews and Muslims of the Iberian Peninsula. However, to link these atrocities to the Palestinian resistance against Jewish colonization and Israeli occupation is an atrocious misreading of history, especially when it is done deliberately to justify, or at the very least condone, the Palestinians' continued occupation and dispossession.

While it is necessary to take into account the Jews' suffering in Europe, it is equally essential to take into account the Palestinian experiences of expulsion, dispossession, and occupation, especially since they were the innocent victims of a historical process in which they had played no role. In fact, they were the objects rather than the subjects of history, and it was they who were made to pay the price for the atrocities committed against European Jews by European Christians. Such atrocities were used not only by Zionists, but also by European anti-Semites interested in denuding Europe of its Jewish population, to justify the creation of a Jewish state in the heart of the Arab world.

This argument does not seek to challenge Israel's legitimacy within its pre-1967 borders, for it is now an incontestable part of the region's political landscape. Rather, it is an argument for the simultaneous recognition of Palestinian suffering and of their right as a people to a state of their own, one that enjoys full sovereignty and the right to self-defense on a basis equal to that of Israel. Above all, it is an argument for the recognition of their search for dignity and legitimate demand for repatriation (even if circumscribed by current realities) and reparations, including an apology by all parties involved, for the humiliation and dispossession inflicted upon them from the beginning of the British mandate until today. It is time that the American policy makers, especially those engaged in resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict, give the Palestinian narrative equal weight with the Israeli one. This is essential if the goal of these policy makers is to protect and enhance American interests in the Arab world and the greater Middle East.

Without an appreciation of the Palestinian narrative, which is part and parcel of the colonized world's larger narrative, no American administration will be able to facilitate an amicable and just solution to a conflict rooted in the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Once Washington is able to empathize with this narrative, as it has come to do with the Israeli one, American policymakers will be able to understand such issues as Jewish settlements, Hamas' non-recognition of Israel, the Palestinians' demand for the right of return, the centrality of Jerusalem to their identity, and their bid for recognition by the UN in their proper historical perspective.

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Finally, as Daniel Levy has pointed out so forcefully, an approach that goes beyond merely negotiating borders is essential to ending the conflict. But this cannot be done without understanding the conflict's full historical context, because limiting the discussion to boundary lines alone has proved to be a non-starter ever since Oslo, given the disparity in power between the two sides.<sup>1</sup> The Oslo peace process, as Yezid Sayigh has pointed out quite aptly, has become "all process, no peace."<sup>2</sup>

Only when Washington acknowledges the legitimacy of the Palestinian narrative and treats it on par with the Israeli narrative will it be able to advance creative ideas that are likely to provide solutions to what currently appear to be intractable problems. If the United States fails to appreciate the Palestinian narrative, it will become increasingly unable to influence this conflict's future course and thus jeopardize its

larger security and economic interests in a rapidly democratizing Middle East.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration has not yet woken up to this reality, as its stance on the Palestinian application for statehood at the UN demonstrated so clearly last September. In light of the record of the last three years, one cannot expect the Obama administration to embrace this reality in 2012, since this is an election year. Consequently, the Israel-Palestine issue will continue to fester with the Netanyahu government building even more illegal Jewish colonies on Palestinian soil. The façade of negotiations between Israel and the PA, such as the recent round held in Jordan, will also go on despite the fact that most objective observers recognize that “Netanyahu is like a man who, while negotiating the division of a pizza, continues to eat it.”<sup>3</sup>

Washington’s inability or unwillingness to recognize the Palestinian reality in its entire complex historical, political, and social dimensions will cost its standing around the Arab world dearly, now that the Middle East is in the throes of democratic upheaval and radical political change. In this new context, the United States will soon be forced to answer the following question: If people’s power is good for Libya, Syria, Egypt, and Tunisia, then why is it not good for Palestine? Its credibility in the Arab world will hinge to a great extent on how Washington answers this question.

## Endnotes

1 Daniel Levy, “The Role of the Border in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict”, *Harvard International Review*, June 26, 2011, accessed on the web at <http://hir.harvard.edu/the-role-of-the-border-in-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict>

2 Yezid Sayigh, “Viewpoint: Mid-East Peace Needs Fresh US Approach”, *BBC News*, September 22, 2011, accessed on the web at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15019876>.

3 Avi Shlaim, “Obama and Israel: The Pessimistic Perspective”, *The Antonian*, Michaelmas Term 2010, p. 7, accessed on the web at [http://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/Antonian\\_Michaelmas2010.pdf](http://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/Antonian_Michaelmas2010.pdf).

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