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## REFLECTIONS ON THE MEANING OF PALESTINE

ALAIN GRESH

*This essay addresses the Palestine question within a European context. After reflecting on why Palestine has been widely embraced as a “universal cause,” the author explores its relationship to the “Jewish question” in the changed context following World War II: Whereas prior to the war it was the Jews who were perceived as a threat to European civilization, today it is the Muslim immigrants who have the scape-goat role. Also discussed are philosemitism (and its manifestations in the West) and anti-Semitism (as it relates to the Arab world), and how these phenomena have been impacted by the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The essay concludes with “utopian musings” on possibilities for a future Palestinian-Israeli peace.*

“IF ONE DEAD ISRAELI is worth several dead Palestinians, how many Congolese corpses are needed for a Gazan shroud?” These words were written by the French journalist Hugues Serraf immediately following Israel’s launch of Operation Cast Lead against Gaza. In his article, Serraf notes that 271 people had been killed at about the same time in the Democratic Republic of Congo by fighters from Uganda on their way to the Central African Republic, without anyone making a fuss about it in the international press. He then goes on to ponder this discrepancy in a way that is entirely valid, whatever one may think of his implied conclusion.

To understand why Israel has become the perfect bad guy, the one everyone loves to hate unreservedly and without risk of contradiction except by a “Zionist”; the one whose excesses systematically evoke comparisons to the Nazis. . . . It is possible that the predictability of reactions concerning Israel springs from a logic that I am frankly unable to grasp. Perhaps it really is possible to say that the Palestine conflict is more serious, more intense, more tragic—in short, more everything than anything else. But you have to demonstrate it.<sup>1</sup>

Let us try to demonstrate it, even if beneath his feigned naiveté Serraf is already convinced of the reason: to his mind, it is anti-Semitism that explains the “fixation” on Palestine, that makes it possible to express without shame

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ALAIN GRESH, longtime editor-in-chief and current deputy-director of the French monthly *Le Monde diplomatique*, is the author of numerous books. The present essay is adapted from the last chapter of his latest book, *De quoi la Palestine est-elle le nom?* (2010).

or remorse an “eternal hatred” for the Jews. Could Palestine be the new name for anti-Semitism?

### WHAT DOES PALESTINE REPRESENT?

Palestine’s place at the heart of the Holy Land and of a Middle East rich in oil explains in part why it has often been front page news, at least since 1967. But for many years the Palestine problem aroused scant indignation or attention. Neither the destruction of an entire society in 1948–49 nor the millions of refugees crowded into miserable camps had much of an impact on a Europe still traumatized by World War II. After 1967, there was a certain mobilization in support of the Palestinian fedayeen by extreme leftist groups within the framework of anti-imperialist solidarity, the exaltation of “armed struggle,” and grand dreams of revolution. But it was not until Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the eruption of the first intifada (the “revolution of stones”) in 1987 that Palestine solidarity spread beyond militant groups.

*Les Temps modernes*, the most influential French cultural and intellectual periodical of the post-World War II era, came out with an edition just after the June 1967 war that provides an excellent example of the uneasiness with regard to Palestine that prevailed among the French Left, including those who had been deeply engaged in the struggle for Algerian independence and decolonization in general. In his preface to the review, of which he was founder and editor, the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre did not even attempt to hide his discomfort:

I wanted simply to recall that, for many of us, there is in this response [to the war] an affective dimension which, for all that, is not just a passing effect of our subjectivity but rather the result of historical and perfectly objective circumstances that we cannot soon forget. Thus are we allergic to anything that could in the least resemble anti-Semitism. To which many Arabs would respond: “We are not anti-Semitic but anti-Israeli.” Doubtless they would be right, but can they change the fact that, for us, the Israelis are also Jews?<sup>2</sup>

In fact, this “reticence” within the European Left concerning Palestine bordered on blindness. Palestinians as such were hardly even mentioned in 1967, while the threat to Israel, presented in the most alarmist terms throughout the 1960s, was totally without foundation since Israel, supported by the United States, could defeat all the Arab countries put together. As Sartre’s preface makes clear, the conflict in Europe was seen through the lens of anti-Semitic persecutions and the “legitimate aspirations of the Jewish people for a country.”

Before returning to the question of anti-Semitism, let us try to reformulate Serraf’s concern and instead ask ourselves why, after decades of disinterest, Palestine suddenly became a “universal cause,” as the philosopher Etienne Balibar put it. Why, during Operation Cast Lead in January 2009, did

everyone from Latin American peasants to French young people to veterans of South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle turn out in massive demonstrations to denounce Israel's aggression against Gaza?

Why is it that at a certain moment a cause is able to mobilize public opinion across the globe? Why, for example, did Vietnam occupy such a privileged place in the world's imagination as of the 1960s, or South Africa a little later? Was it justified? The United States at the time said that communism was responsible for crimes far more serious than the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. The apartheid regime, meanwhile, claimed that there were far fewer violent deaths in South Africa than under this or that African dictatorship. The murder of the student leader and activist Steve Biko by the apartheid police in September 1977, a year after the Soweto riots, touched off far greater indignation than the elimination at the same time of thousands of opponents of the Ethiopian dictator Haile Mariam Mengistu. In other words, so many arguments raising the same point that Serraf made about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict being less deadly than the "little wars" on the borders between Uganda and the Congo.

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Be that as it may, and whether we like it or not, international public opinion is not formed by death tolls alone. It also responds to the symbolism of situations. At a given moment, a conflict can express the "truth" of an entire era, spilling beyond the narrow confines/boundaries of its geographic localization to acquire a universal significance. Despite their differences, Vietnam, South Africa, and Palestine are all on the fault line between North and South. The history of the last century was no doubt marked by the two world wars; by the emergence, rise, and fall of communism; and by the consolidation of U.S. power. But it also witnessed the emancipation from the yoke of colonialism of the great majority of the world's population, who had fought for the right to determine their own destiny. Vietnam symbolized the struggle of a small Third World people against the greatest power of the North. South Africa encapsulated a revolt against a white-dominated segregationist system; Palestine, the last survival of European settler colonialism, crystallizes the aspirations for a world that has turned the page on two centuries of Western domination.

What, then, is the meaning of Palestine? What does it represent? First, colonial domination by the West. Next, an ongoing injustice characterized by a permanent violation of international law. Finally, the logic of double standards applied by various governments, adopted (in essence) by the United Nations, and theorized by a significant number of Western intellectuals. At the crossroads between East and West, South and North, Palestine symbolizes at one and the same time the old world, marked by the hegemony of the North, and the gestation of a new world founded on the principle of equality between peoples.

Serraf was right, though perhaps not in the way he intended. The coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict *does* obey different rules from those

prevailing in other conflicts, and Israel *is* judged by special standards. Indeed, is there another example of an occupation condemned for more than forty years by the United Nations without there being either results or sanctions? Is there another case where a conquering power has been permitted to implant almost a half million settlers in the territories it occupied (which under international law represents a war crime), without the international community emitting more than faint verbal condemnations with no follow-up?

The case of Iraq is emblematic of the West's sliding scale of values. Within four months of Saddam Hussein's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait, the United Nations had condemned the aggression, given the green light for the creation of a military coalition against Baghdad, and launched a war of massive destruction followed by a deadly embargo that lasted more than ten years and culminated in the U.S. invasion of 2003. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have lost their lives since August 1990; the country is in tatters. Imagine for a moment that on 3 August 1990 the United States and the European Union had instead demanded (as they have for decades in the case of Palestine) that the "two parties" sit down for negotiations "in good faith" in the aim of reaching an agreement; twenty years later, Kuwait would still be occupied.

Cloaking themselves in a reading of the Jewish genocide that absolves Israel a priori of any responsibility for possible war crimes committed since 1948, the West refuses to apply the same criteria of analysis and judgment to the Palestine conflict that it has applied to Iraq, Serbia, or Iran. In other regions, one hears demands for international law, human rights, freedom of the press, and the right of journalists to cover wars, and about the importance of observing proportionality in military responses. Serbian exactions against the Kosovars, often real but sometimes exaggerated by the international media, served to justify NATO's military intervention against Serbia in March 1999. But when one of the most powerful armies in the world bombs the minuscule territory of Gaza, into which over 1.5 million people are crammed, deliberately devastates the infrastructure, destroys schools and hospitals, and kills hundreds of civilians, the Western governments find countless justifications for what elsewhere would be called war crimes, if not crimes against humanity.

### **PHILOSEMITISM IN THE WEST**

Is all this to say that the "Jewish question" has no relation to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? Certainly not. Indeed, the Jewish question in its dual aspects—philosemitism and anti-Semitism—has acquired even greater weight as a result of the conflict, but the context has changed. Whereas at the beginning of the twentieth century the Jews were perceived as a threat to European civilization, at the dawn of the twenty-first century it is the Muslims who have replaced them in the unhappy role of scapegoat. Moreover, since 11 September 2001 Palestine is often presented as a battlefield in the "clash of civilizations" opposing the Western world to Islamism, Islamic terrorism, even Islam. In this configuration, Israel now

occupies the place of which Herzl once dreamed: as the vanguard of the West against Barbarism.

Europe's new radical Right—from Geert Wilders in the Netherlands to Oskar Freysinger in Switzerland—has rightly recognized that anti-Semitism can now be packed off to the attic of outdated concepts. Freysinger, the man responsible for the November 2009 referendum to ban the construction of minarets, explains:

Our party has always defended Israel because we know that if Israel disappears, we would lose our front-line of defense. . . . As long as the Muslims are focused on Israel, our struggle will not be difficult. But the minute Israel goes, they will come after the West.<sup>3</sup>

Philosemitism is by no means confined to the radical Right, but has become widespread among European intellectuals, including on the Left. The phenomenon has been analyzed with bracing clarity by two Israelis, one religious (Ivan Segré)<sup>4</sup> and the other secular (Yitzhak Laor).<sup>5</sup> According to Segré, philosemitism is the underpinning of a vast ideological operation aimed at injecting new urgency into the old slogan “defense of the West,” a term that had been disqualified following its use by Hitler and later by thuggish militants belonging to assorted groups of the European far Right—one of which was actually called “Occident”—who hung around Paris's Latin Quarter in the 1960s. Thus, at the very moment when the condemnation of Nazism seemed total, the concept of “defending the West” unexpectedly resurfaced.

However, an “ideological operation” of this kind could not succeed unless the Jews could be identified with Europe and unless the existence of an age-old “Judeo-Christian civilization” could gain acceptance as an established fact. This latter maneuver, though successful, merits a raised eyebrow when one considers that the expression appeared for the first time in the 1930s precisely to counter the Hitlerian discourse of “defending the West” and Christian civilization against the Jews. It was against this background that the French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain wrote in 1942 that the source of Western values was the “Judeo-Christian” tradition. This vision, certainly, was based on worthy intentions and continued to be used, notably in the United States, to affirm the values of the “free world” against the atheism of the Soviet Union. In the 1960s, the concept fell into disfavor, when the anticolonial wars of liberation discredited any notion of a war of civilization in which the North represented the moral good.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, it was with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 that the term “Judeo-Christian civilization” was rehabilitated and indeed enjoyed unprecedented acceptance, since by that time the Jews were part of this reinvented West, to the detriment of the new pariahs, the Muslims.

The ahistorical posture that identifies Judaism with Europe has never been better expressed than by the Israeli writer Amos Oz. In a talk given at Frankfurt in summer 2005, Oz describes the Jews of Europe on the eve of the genocide as

these over-enthusiastic Europhiles, who could speak so many of Europe's languages, recite its poetry, who believed in its moral superiority, appreciated its ballet and opera, cultivated its heritage, dreamed of its post-national unity and adored its manners, clothes and fashions, who had loved it unconditionally and uninhibitedly for decades, . . . had done everything humanly possible to please it, to contribute to it in every way and in every domain, to become part of it, to break through its cool hostility with frantic courtship, to make friends, to ingratiate themselves, to be accepted, to be loved. . . .<sup>7</sup>

Reacting to this astonishing distortion of reality, Yitzhak Laor wrote,

The Jewish nation that was murdered in Europe. . . was not a nation of "Europhiles." . . . Most of the Jewish victims of the Nazis did not "speak so many of Europe's languages, recite its poetry, believe in its moral superiority, appreciate its ballet and opera. . . ." This is simply the desecration of the memory of the victims of the Holocaust, most of whom never went to the opera, never read European poetry.<sup>8</sup>

Quite simply, Amos Oz denies the "otherness" of the Jewish victims, who in fact were much more like today's immigrant workers than like "well-bred" Europeans, as is clear from the photographs of the East-European ghettos as well as from European and U.S. government restrictions on Jewish immigration during the first third of the twentieth century.

The rejection of any notion of a millennial Judeo-Christian civilization is not the sole province of secular thinkers but also of the Jewish religious intelligentsia—and this since the 1930s. The great philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz later added his voice to the dissenters in a famous text published in 1968 by *Ha'Aretz* under the title "On the So-Called 'Common Judeo-Christian Heritage.'"

More recently, Ivan Segré, analyzing the discourse of a number of French public intellectuals—from Bernard-Henri-Lévy to Alexandre Adler, from Pierre-André Taguieff to Alain Finkielkraut—deplored what he saw as a tendency to dissolve Judaism and its uniqueness into Christianity and the West. For Segré, this trend constitutes Act II of the "vast ideological operation" to reinvigorate the shibboleth "defending the West." The philosopher Alain Finkielkraut adds his own touch to the enterprise when he claims that America represents the "inverse image of Auschwitz," and that "the memory of Auschwitz" has become the moral law of the democratic conscience. From this perspective, to oppose U.S. policy is tantamount to revealing one's anti-Semitism.

Meanwhile, another trend worth noting involves the distancing or even displacement of the European genocide "away from Europe." Shlomo Sand, the Israeli historian who became famous for his book *The Invention of the Jewish People*,<sup>9</sup> had earlier published an interesting work (not translated into English<sup>10</sup>), where he discusses Claude Lanzmann's 1985 film *Shoah*. Besides the fact that the documentary was financed by the Israeli government through a dummy corporation, Sand notes that Lanzmann

proposes a total break between the world of high culture and the “Final Solution.” Indeed, *Shoah* relegates the mass murder to the backward fringes of Europe. All the places shown as sites of the Holocaust are small towns in Poland, where the ruins of the concentration camps also lie. [The film totally passes over the undeniable fact that] the decisions, organization, logistics of this death industry all originated in the centers of German high culture.<sup>11</sup>

Part of the Western genealogy of the genocide is thus deliberately obscured. Neither eugenics, nor the massacres of the colonial period, nor the brutalization of European life by World War I are mentioned in Lanzmann’s film, for they would force us to try to understand how Western civilization and its “high culture” could have given rise to Nazism, even if there was nothing predestined about making the genocide of the Jews into the “truth” of the West.

#### WHAT ABOUT ARAB ANTI-SEMITISM?

But could the Jewish genocide be the “truth” of the Muslim world? Though born under the religious cloak of Christian Judeophobia well before the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, anti-Semitism has since become linked to Islam. We all know the tenacity of the confusion between Judaism and Zionism, as well as the persistence of certain formulas about “Jews and money” and “international Jewish conspiracies.” Recourse by some defenders of the Palestinian cause to anti-Semitic arguments, widespread throughout the Arab world, cannot be denied. Still, even without a detailed study of the place of Jews in Muslim societies historically, one can say without hesitation that at least up to the eighteenth century it was better to be a Jew in the Ottoman Empire than a Jew in Europe, notwithstanding the uncertainties inherent in a pattern involving long periods of tolerance alternating with short moments of persecution. It was moreover to the Ottoman Empire that the Jews expelled from Spain by the Catholic Reconquista in the fifteenth century found refuge. The emancipation of the Jews on the Old Continent, the launch of the colonial adventure, and Europe’s defense of the religious “minorities” (mainly Christian but also Jewish) all contributed to changes in the status of the Jews and in how they were perceived in Arab society. Thus, the Crémieux Decree of 1870 turned the Jews of Algeria into French citizens, uprooting them from their Arab culture and leading them to separate themselves from their human environment. Nonetheless, it was especially the Palestinian conflict that stirred up tensions and placed the Middle Eastern Jews in a precarious situation.

In the Islamic movements, the struggle for Palestine gave rise to a Judeophobic discourse with religious, though not racial, overtones. At the same time, a “racism of war” of the sort that appears in every drawn-out conflict—between Frenchmen and Germans, Serbs and Croats, Turks and Armenians, and so on—was reinforced. The prolongation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

feeds this discourse: not surprisingly, the exploitation of Palestinian frustration and repression sometimes results in borrowings from traditional European anti-Semitism, an obvious example being the wide diffusion in the Arab world of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. These hate-mongering harangues, encouraged by the Arab governments (including those that have signed peace treaties with Israel), offer a useful diversion to help populations forget the authoritarian and corrupt nature of their rulers. But does this make the liberation of Palestine in itself any less legitimate? Not so long ago, despotic governments in Africa railed against South African apartheid, but did this discredit the legitimacy of the struggle of the African National Congress (ANC) against the white government?

Israel's self-definition as the "Jewish state" contributes to the confusion between Judaism, Zionism, and Israel. How is one to differentiate them when Israel itself does everything possible to lump them together? And how to avoid such confusions when French and American Jews can perform their military service in an army of occupation?

The way Israel and Western countries use the Jewish genocide to justify, at least implicitly, Israel's actions against the Palestinians also leads to extreme reactions of denial in some Middle Eastern quarters, on the order of "If the genocide allows Israel to be exonerated, then we deny it." Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad is the most notable example of this type, even while he denies that anti-Semitism exists in his country, which has the largest Jewish community in the Middle East outside of Israel. As Gilbert Achcar reminds us, extreme anti-Zionism must be distinguished from true anti-Semitism: "However, the most common attitude, far from passing over the Holocaust and the horrors of Nazism in silence, accuses Israel of imitating or reproducing them and, sometimes, of going one better than the Nazis."<sup>12</sup>

Leaving aside the exaggerated rhetoric and tendency to overstatement so common in the Middle East, it must be pointed out that comparisons to Nazism as the ultimate means of stigmatizing one's enemy is quite different from—indeed the opposite of—denying the Shoah or, worse, justifying Nazi crimes.

Edward Said, addressing the Arabs or Muslims who cast doubt on the Jewish genocide or lionize the French intellectual Roger Garaudy, the dean of Holocaust deniers, wrote:

Why should we expect the whole world to take cognizance of our suffering as Arabs if we are incapable of recognizing the suffering of others, even if they happen to be our oppressors? . . . To say that we must take cognizance of the reality of the Holocaust in no way implies acceptance of the notion that the Holocaust absolves Zionism for what it inflicted on the Palestinians.<sup>13</sup>

It is obvious that the continuation of the conflict feeds the most obscurantist and dangerous visions, gravely damaging prospects for a future peace or long-term coexistence.

In contrast to the situation in the Middle East, traditional anti-Semitism in Europe and the United States has been marginalized. After World War II, Leon Blum renounced France's highest office because he did not believe his country was ready for a Jewish president. Today, in France as in most countries of Europe (at least Western Europe), there is no position that a Jew cannot attain. All the major French political formations except the extreme rightist National Front are mobilized against anti-Semitism, and France has acknowledged (however belatedly) responsibility for the crimes of the Vichy regime. The new generations have grown up being taught about the Nazi genocide: from school programs to television specials, from public commemorations to political speeches, hardly a week goes by without reference to the Holocaust. While recent years have seen a resurgence of anti-Semitic incidents in Europe, these are limited and essentially reflective of what is happening on the ground in Palestine; in other words, they fall within the category of "racism of war" mentioned earlier. Certainly, there is no parallel with the 1930s, when anti-Semitism was not simply an opinion but a major element in the great political currents of the day, and indeed the official policy of certain states. Like all forms of racism, anti-Semitism must, of course, be fought without concession, but it is no longer a major threat in Western societies, contrary to Islamophobia and the rejection of Muslims, which is.

#### UTOPIAN MUSINGS ON A FUTURE PEACE

It is not difficult to summarize the current state of the Palestine conflict: a deadly impasse fueled by hatreds and fears, an intolerable injustice masked by the indifference of the uninvolved. The only solution to date that seems realistic—two states living side by side—is receding at the same rate that the colonies of the West Bank and East Jerusalem grow and spread. Meanwhile, the idea of one state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean is rejected by the overwhelming majority of Israelis and by most Palestinians.

For some decades, efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict have centered on negotiations between the leaders of the two camps. These have resulted in bilateral treaties between Israel and Egypt (1979) and between Israel and Jordan (1994), as well as in the so-called Oslo accords between Israel and the Palestinians that began with the famous handshake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat in 1993. Notwithstanding these successes, and despite the creation of a Palestinian Authority charged with civil administration and the maintenance of order in the occupied territories, the Oslo strategy has run its course. In a region that always seems poised between wars, where animosities and armaments continue to build, a thousand and one explanations for this failure can be found. The principal one, however, goes back to the colonial nature of the Zionist project that, like all colonial ventures, nurtured a sense of superiority toward the "indigenous" population, which, in this case, has prevented the Israeli leadership from dealing with the Palestinians as equal partners and from recognizing their right to self-determination.

The Oslo agreements changed neither the arrogance of the occupiers nor such notions as “the security of one Israeli is worth ten Palestinian lives.” Tirelessly invoking the hostility of its neighbors while carefully keeping in view the link between Israel and the Jewish genocide of World War II, the Israeli leaders have constructed a concept of absolute security, based on absolute domination, the very unattainability of which leads the country into endless wars.

The prospect of absolute security is all the more remote in that the Zionist venture has been unable to remove the native population; millions of Palestinians continue to cling to their lands. The demographic threat is in fact Israel’s greatest fear. All means are acceptable to fight it, including the in-gathering of immigrants who, if not Jewish, at least are “white”: out of the million or so from the former Soviet Union who received Israeli citizenship, an estimated 30 to 40 percent are not Jewish. And if some of these turn out to be openly anti-Semitic, who cares? In 2007 the Israeli press reported that swastikas and anti-Jewish graffiti, apparently the work of immigrants from the Soviet Union, were found on the walls of schools and synagogues, and that religious Jews were attacked.<sup>14</sup> In February 2008, the Israeli Knesset moved to ban the “promotion of Nazi ideology.”

Given the enormous gap between what Israel is prepared to offer in a settlement and the bare minimum that is acceptable to the Palestinians, the focus is on separating the two populations physically. But as a result of decades of increasingly intense colonization, what once would have been a simple matter operationally becomes more and more unrealistic as the two communities become more and more intertwined geographically. In a frank statement made in February 2010, Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak observed,

If, and as long as between the Jordan and the sea, there is only one political entity, named Israel, it will end up being either non-Jewish or non-democratic. . . . If the Palestinians vote in elections, it is a binational state, and if they don’t, it is an apartheid state.<sup>15</sup>

The Israeli leadership’s rejection—by actions if not explicitly—of the creation of a sovereign independent Palestinian state, coupled with its insistence that Israel remain a Jewish state, leaves little doubt as to the outcome.

The very starkness of the current realities forces reflection on other approaches than those envisaged up to now. The starting point must be the indisputable fact that there are two communities of nearly equal size now living within the borders of historic Palestine. We can go on enumerating and delving into the injustices and analyzing the errors that have brought us to this situation, but facts are stubborn: the Israeli Jews and the Palestinian Arabs are on this land to stay; neither is capable of expelling the other. Furthermore, would one wish, on moral and political grounds, to repair one injustice, however gross, by another?

Whatever institutional form a solution may take (two states, a confederation, a binational state, a unitary state based on the South African model), it will necessarily involve both peoples. This was the basis of the democratic state idea proposed in the late 1960s by Arafat's Fatah, which called for a "free democratic society in Palestine encompassing all Palestinians, including Muslims, Christians, and Jews."<sup>16</sup> Eventually the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), recognizing that the project could not attract more than a handful of Israeli Jews, and seeking to win international recognition after the October 1973 war, gave up the idea and rallied behind a solution involving two separate states.

If we accept the reality of two peoples in the land of Palestine, we must draw appropriate conclusions: no solution can be imposed by either of the two sides, and a common solution cannot be achieved except through a common struggle. If this idea seems far-fetched, it is no more so than the South African ANC's "rainbow society" project when it was formulated in the early 1960s: not only was it anathema to apartheid's supporters, but it was also strongly opposed by the advocates of "black power." The aim here is not to try to come up with a specific blueprint for an ideal outcome, which in any case can only be drawn by those involved, but to reflect on some of the markers along a path that might lead there.

Most important, no solid peace can be built on the ambiguities and false expectations (sometimes encouraged) that characterized the Oslo process. With regard to the present, any peace would require recognition of Palestinian oppression and Israeli domination, as well as renunciation of the arrogance that has permitted the Israeli government to defy not only international law and conventions but also the humanist values it claims to embody. If Palestinians cannot feel comfortable in Israel, neither can anyone for whom humanity, morality, and civil rights are not just words. Racism has taken root in Israeli society, including in school textbooks. Avraham Burg, former speaker of the Knesset, likens the atmosphere in the country to that of Germany on the eve of the Nazi seizure of power in the 1930s: "How do our slogans 'Arabs Out!' and 'Transfer Now!' differ from the frenzied cries of the mobs screaming '*Juden raus*'? . . . Don't say 'These are just words.' They reflect a reality."<sup>17</sup>

Yet there are numerous and ongoing examples of joint Palestinian-Israeli action against the occupation in its various manifestations: regular mobilization against the apartheid wall cutting through Palestinian territory roughly parallel to the Green Line that encloses tens of thousands of Palestinians, separating them from their lands; demonstrations to protest breaking ground for new settlements, including in East Jerusalem; sits-ins and rallies against house demolitions, evictions of Palestinian families to make way for settlers, settler encroachments on Palestinian lands, and so on. Within Israel itself,

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large demonstrations have mobilized against the militarization of the country, and the movement of soldiers and officers who refuse to serve in the occupied territories or in Israel's aggressive wars, while its numbers ebb and flow in keeping with developments on the ground, remains a force with moral weight. These movements are cause for hope, proof that in the right circumstances rejection of oppression and domination is capable of kindling a common struggle on a larger scale.

For the time being, these opposition movements remain relatively isolated, with only limited political impact in Israel, where the great majority of the population is still solidly behind the security policies of successive governments. In the present climate, such groups will not develop without the emergence of a vast international movement whose action drives home to the Israeli public the price of continuing the occupation. Recently, the "Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions" campaign, modeled on the international boycott and sanctions regime against South Africa that ultimately hastened apartheid's fall, has begun to gain ground.

What about the use of violence? The violence of the oppressor always provokes the violence of the oppressed, legitimizing their right to resist occupation, including by arms. Always, the dream of the conqueror is to find within the occupied population persons willing to collaborate; always, the violence of those who refuse is called terrorism. Even so, the legal right to resist violently—recognized under international law—must be subordinated to its effectiveness within the context of the overall struggle and its objectives. South Africa offers a useful example here. When the ANC decided after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 that nonviolent methods were not working, it was faced with three options, according to its leaders: sabotage, terrorism, and guerilla warfare. The last option was dismissed as unrealistic while the second was deemed contrary to the ANC objective of winning as many whites as possible over to the cause. Sabotage was the course finally decided upon.

While the PLO's armed struggle during the 1960s and 1970s allowed it to rally the Palestinian masses, especially in the refugee camps, it was never effective militarily. Hijackings and other terrorist operations carried out beyond Israel's borders in the early 1970s were soon abandoned following realization of the damage done to the Palestinian cause in world opinion. Nonetheless, the rhetoric of the armed struggle survived and even became more popular after the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000, especially with the launch of suicide attacks. These last are doubly problematic: on the one hand, the targeting of civilians is always difficult to accept from a moral standpoint (the fact that Israeli violence also—and especially—targets civilians is beside the point); on the other hand, such attacks are disastrous from a political standpoint not only because they alienate international sympathy for the Palestinians but also because they cause Israeli Jews to close ranks even more tightly around their government. These considerations probably contributed to the embrace of nonviolent strategies by the

civil society movements, both Palestinian and Israeli, against the separation wall or land confiscations. It must be acknowledged, however, that Israel's brutality and the desire for vengeance it provokes, not to mention the despair created by the lack of political or diplomatic prospects, do not make nonviolence strategies any easier to pursue.

A crucial element of any new strategy is that the Palestinian and Israeli movements working for peace find appropriate ways—as of now—to address and acknowledge the transformative traumas that have afflicted their two peoples: the Nazi genocide for the Jews, the Nakba for the Palestinians. There are many on both sides who recognize this need; Arafat's attempt to visit Auschwitz, though unsuccessful, was within that frame, and a number of Palestinian intellectuals, most prominently Edward Said, have written on the theme. Similarly, many Israelis are fully cognizant of the meaning of the Nakba for Palestinians; at the Taba negotiations in January 2001, the entire Israeli delegation agreed to recognize their country's responsibility (at last partial) for the expulsion of the Palestinians. Without doubt, much work needs to be done here, and certainly the point is not to try to establish an equivalence between the two tragedies, which in any case would be absurd, or to claim that the genocide of the Jews "justifies" Israel's existence. Perhaps what is needed, as a beginning, is simply to acknowledge that there is a profound suffering on both sides that is at the base of (and fuels) existential fears, and to reflect together on how this suffering can be healed.

Beyond that, the Jewish Israelis and Palestinians who struggle together against the occupation must endeavor to construct not a common history but rather two narratives that are at least parallel, if not compatible. Here, too, South Africa offers useful lessons. Nelson Mandela recounts in his memoirs how, at his first meeting with President Pieter Botha, he brought up the subject of the Boer revolt in 1916.

I said that in my opinion our struggle was parallel to that famous revolt, and we talked for some time about that historic episode. Obviously South African history looks very different to Blacks and Whites. They saw their revolt as a quarrel between brothers and my struggle as a revolution. I said that we could also consider our present struggle as one between brothers, but of different colors.<sup>18</sup>

The "Battle of Blood River" offers another creative example of Mandela's abiding desire to heal the wounds of history. On 16 December 1838, the Boers, who several years earlier had begun their "Great Trek" to the interior of the country to escape British rule—an epic that would shape the Afrikaner community—clashed on the banks of the Ncome River with the Zulu king and his vast army. (Months earlier, the Boer leader Piet Retief and his party of seventy had been executed by the Zulu king during negotiations about land.) Thousands of Zulus were killed in that battle, which takes its name from the river turned red with Zulu blood. The Battle of Blood River occupies a major place in Afrikaner mythology and identity and was long celebrated

annually by whites. Since the fall of apartheid, it continues to be celebrated annually as a public holiday, but under the name “Day of Reconciliation,” whose purpose is “to focus on overcoming the conflicts of the past and building a new nation.”<sup>19</sup> In a ceremony marking the day on 16 December 1998, South Africa’s Minister of Home Affairs Mangosuthu Buthelezi officially apologized for the massacre of Piet Retief and his companions, while at the same time acknowledging the suffering of the Zulus under British Colonial and Afrikaner rule. All South Africans, he said, should consider the day as “a new covenant which binds us to the shared commitment of building a new country.”<sup>20</sup> Dare we imagine that someday, in a future entity built in the land of Palestine, certain events from Judeo-Israeli history will be commemorated alongside others from Palestinian history?

In the meantime, this unending conflict has created between the two communities a chasm deepened by countless crimes. Even if the violence of forced exile, occupation, and oppression cannot be put on the same plane as the violence of the resistance, there is no question that both have created lasting traumas. The pain of a mother who has lost her child is always the same whether the death resulted from an Israeli bomb or a Palestinian suicide attack. Edward Said called for the creation of a truth and reconciliation commission on the South African model that would make public the human rights violations, both Palestinian and Israeli. The United Nations Commission set up after Israel’s winter 2008–09 offensive against Gaza, led by Judge Richard Goldstone,<sup>21</sup> is an example, despite the unfortunate controversies that undermined the important findings and recommendations of its report, one of which was that those responsible for the Gaza massacres be arraigned before the International Criminal Court. Without waiting for official actions, can we imagine that Israelis and Palestinians committed to reconciliation begin as of now to set up forums where they can look into certain incidents in a first move toward overcoming the traumas of the conflict?

Such ideas could justifiably be called utopian, both politically and from the standpoint of the international and regional balance of power. Even so, it should be possible to envision stages that could help lower tensions and facilitate the road ahead. But whatever happens, any future must be part of a world based on universal values that transcend ethnic and national divisions.

In his latest book, a memoir written almost two decades after the end of apartheid, the great South African writer André Brink refers to the “near despair about the uncertainty that lies just under the skin of the new South Africa.” Particularly at such times, he writes,

I reach for the kind of faith that informs a small incident which happened a few years ago to a good friend in Cape Town. At the age of five, his son had just started preschool. And to the delight of my friend, who is white, his son very quickly became friends with a black boy. It was no ordinary friendship. The two were quite inseparable. Then, after a few

months, the white boy was present when his black friend was picked up from school by his father. The little white boy gawked in amazement. And very early the next morning he was at school to await the arrival of his friend. The moment he saw him, the white boy ran to the gate, breathless with excitement. "You never told me," he cried, "that your daddy was black!"<sup>22</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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