

Who's for a Palestinian State?

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Labor Party leader Avi Gabai is right when he says: “The peace process vis-à-vis the Palestinians is interesting only for people over 50.” “Do you think,” he told his supporters, “that people care about a Palestinian state when [President Mahmoud] Abbas is irrelevant and does not even come to negotiate?” There is no reason young Israelis should care about a Palestinian state when their Palestinian peers have stopped believing in it. Abbas is irrelevant not only to Israelis but to Palestinians as well. With ample help from President Donald Trump and the Israeli Right, the Palestinian state has received a pauper’s funeral.

On the Palestinian street, mistrust of Abbas (Abu Mazen) and the Palestinian Authority (PA) was clear when protests erupted against a new social security law. Responding to pent-up anger against the PA, Abu Mazen froze the inchoate law, in which workers would have been expected to pay 7% of their monthly salaries while employers would contribute 9%. It is interesting that workers who do not receive pensions or unemployment benefits are precisely the ones who most object. They know the PA cannot be trusted; that these revenues, along with the billions injected into PA coffers from donor countries, do not serve the public. The PA would use them to finance the inflated salaries of its officials and civil society organizations.

Young Israelis are not interested in the occupied territories because they believe there is no alternative to Occupation. They know no other reality. Their fate is to serve three years at checkpoints, checking identity cards, chasing stone-throwers, erasing the experience through “post-army” trips, and then re-entering normal life. On the other hand, young Palestinians do not see any reason to fight the Occupation while the PA itself maintains security cooperation with the Israeli Defense Forces, and while Abu Mazen cracks down on anyone who dares to post anything that criticizes the PA or expose its corruption. Palestinians believe that both the PA and Hamas lack the will to create a modern democratic state.

In the Arab world, the idea of the nation-state has been dealt a mortal blow. The Arab Spring toppled tyrants in a domino effect, leaving behind scorched earth, broken economies, hundreds of thousands of dead, and millions of refugees. The Arab “republics” collapsed – from Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, to Syria and Iraq. Only the oil kingdoms have survived so far. With the disintegration of the Arab states, the living conditions of Palestinians are in some respects better than those of the Syrians,

Iraqis, Yemenis, Libyans, and Egyptians. In the post Arab Spring, the idea of a Palestinian state has lost value and feasibility. Nationalism has become synonymous with oppression, devastation, and civil war.

The Zionist national movement is also at a dead end. By opposing Palestinian self-determination, Israel effectively undermines the Zionist vision of a Jewish and democratic state. Without a Palestinian state, millions of Palestinians will languish under Israeli sovereignty. Therefore, the Jewish character of the state must be anchored in law, such as the recently passed nation-state law. Giant billboards showing Trump and Netanyahu shaking hands tell much about the Zionist national idea. To survive, Netanyahu must rely on nationalists like Trump, Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán, and Matteo Salvini. Netanyahu's main rival in the coming election, Benny Gantz, has hung huge signs with a Hebrew slogan that translates as "Israel über alles." An experienced general, Gantz understands that to defeat Netanyahu the battle must be brought into right-wing (enemy) territory.

Israel erected a separation barrier to preserve its Jewish character. For his part, Trump demands funds to build his "wall" between the United States and Mexico. This was his principal commitment to his voters. He promised to keep invading hordes from Latin America out of (still) white America. Britain has tried for two years to Brexit from the EU to preserve its "British" character. In Germany, the new far right "Alternative for Germany" party was founded to preserve the "German" character of a country flooded with immigrants fleeing the Syrian inferno. Hungary has also set up border fences and Italy has closed its coastline to African refugees, including the parents of children drowned in the Mediterranean.

In the name of nationalism, Netanyahu, Trump and their ilk are waging an all-out war against globalization, which has brought the nations of the world into one large Internet network. Globalization claimed new victims in the industrialized West after manufacturing jobs were lost to China. The war against it by the New Right dismisses global warming while sparking trade wars. Slogans such as "America (Hungary, Germany, France, Israel) First" are not an answer to the widening social gaps. The ideological base of these leaders rests on hatred of foreigners, women, liberals, the press, the courts, and democracy itself.

The concept of nationalism developed along with the Industrial Revolution in the mid-19th century during the so-called "Spring of Nations." Old monarchies were swept aside and independent nation-states created. The Industrial Revolution was driven by the very fuels that have given rise to the climate change that now threatens humanity. Today, nationalism serves as a weapon to counter the fourth Industrial Revolution. This revolution is an alternative to existing neoliberal regimes. It can pave the way toward a cooperative, green, decentralized, and shared economy that may yet save the planet.

Avi Gabai is right in saying that only those above 50 are interested in the Palestinian state, but the reason is that they still hold on to the idea of national Zionism. They are part of a global middle class that remains frustrated after losing assets in the 2008 meltdown. They long for the 'good old days' when work promised a salary that would support their families and cover their children's education. Today's young are born into a different reality, in which the state has betrayed them and politics benefit the rich. They have ceased to believe in nationalist slogans. They study, make a living, and communicate with peers around the world through Internet platforms. Their culture is universal, their boundaries are defined by social networks, and ethnic pluralism is a source of enrichment.

On the other side of the fence, a new generation of young Palestinians is coming into its own. In its eyes, the idea of a Palestinian state is distasteful. Statehood justifies the existence of a corrupt Palestinian Authority that cooperates with the Occupation.

Haaretz published an article by two former generals, Amos Gilad and Udi Evental, entitled “The collapse of the PA is a violation of our security.” They write, “The dismantling of the PA and the expansion of Israeli control and de facto annexation are likely to lead to the disappearance of the two-state solution, and strengthen the idea of one state, which is gaining a foothold in the Palestinian arena.”

In fact, what the generals see as a “violation of our security” is an opportunity to normalize the economy and society in Israel. The Palestinian renunciation of the idea of statehood and the adoption of the one-state paradigm result from a refusal to live under Occupation on the one hand and under a corrupt Authority on the other. As the dream of “liquidating” Israel has ebbed, the desire to gain the same basic rights as Israeli citizens is on the rise. Let us not forget that today the Palestinian economy is fully integrated into Israel’s: the shekel is the legal currency, as is the customs envelope.

There is no reason Palestinians should not have an opportunity to develop their own economy, the right to vote, freedom of movement, as well as the basic rights enjoyed by people elsewhere. The irony is that as Palestinian nationalism collapses, a one-state solution is taking its place. It is time to reject the zero-sum game and adopt a new paradigm, where the prosperity of one side does not require the failure of the other, and where the independence of one side is not conditioned on the destruction of the other. An economy built on modern technology and renewable energy can be an excellent platform for a new and common Israeli-Palestinian future.

- Translated from the Hebrew by Robert Goldman

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