

100 Years After San Remo and the Denial of Arab Rights Continues

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It was appropriate that during the week in which we commemorated the 100th anniversary of the San Remo Conference, Israelis and Americans were discussing the Israeli government's declared intention to annex large portions of occupied Palestinian lands. As was the case at San Remo, the arguments made and the language used by the parties to this discussion were deeply upsetting, demonstrating no respect for the victims of their designs, the Palestinian Arab people.

One of the purposes of San Remo was to ratify the British and French claims to divide up the Arab East, which they saw as the spoils of World War I. It made no difference to them that the Arab inhabitants of the region opposed their imperial ambitions. Nor did they care to honour the agreements they had previously signed with Arab leaders in which they claimed to respect the Arab's right to independence at the war's end. The signed agreements had been but a ruse to secure Arab support against the Ottoman Empire. And with the war over, the British representative said "In Palestine, we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting... the desire and prejudices of the... Arabs who inhabit that ancient land."

Masking their real intent to control territories that would give them footholds in the Eastern Mediterranean, the participants at San Remo declared that the Arabs were not ready for self-rule and so would require British and French tutelage. The result was that the Arab East was carved up into Lebanon and Syria, which became French Mandates, and Palestine and Trans-Jordan, which were placed under British control, with the British pledging to honor their commitment to support a "Jewish homeland" in Palestine.



Delegates to the San Remo conference in Italy, 25 April 1920 (Source: Public Domain)

By what right were these decisions made? On the one hand, the justification was the imperialist's "right of conquest." Underlying this claim, however, was a deep and abiding racism, that viewed Arabs as a lower form of humanity not deserving of the same consideration accorded to Westerners.

One hundred years later, much the same is in evidence in the discussion over Israel's plans to annex the occupied Palestinian lands. And it is true for most of the American sides involved in this discussion: the Trump Administration and the foreign policy establishment.

For their part, the Trump Administration issued their own updated version of San Remo calling it the "Deal of the Century." They recognised Israel's right of conquest, giving them the nod to annex large portions of the lands they occupied in 1967. That the "Deal" was Israel-centric was no surprise, since it was concocted by three US administration officials, all of whom are invested in an illegal West Bank settlement.

Like San Remo, the "Deal" declared that the Arabs were not ready for statehood, so it did not recognise their sovereign rights. Instead, it laid out "specific terms and conditions" they must fulfill before they were to be allowed to practice a form of limited self-rule in portions of the West Bank.

Which parts of the territories could Israel annex? According to the "Deal," that would be decided by a US-Israeli map-making committee, once again replicating the San Remo Conference's arrogant contempt for Arab rights. In the end, however, the decision on what to include would be, in the words of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo "an Israeli decision."

The way Israel's annexation plans are being discussed Washington's foreign policy establishment is not much better. While most of them are opposed to Israel annexing the territories, their reasoning is oftentimes disturbingly Israel-focused. Largely made up of

former administration officials, whose failures have brought us to where we are today, or media commentators who have had a dismal record on Middle East issues, this foreign policy crowd are wringing their hands in nervous anticipation of annexation, but for all the wrong reasons. The rhetoric they have been using to express their concerns displays a total lack of understanding of their responsibility for the current state of affairs, coupled with a strong undercurrent of racism.

A featured opinion piece in the Washington Post by that paper's prize-winning deputy editorial page editor, Jackson Diehl, serves as a good example. The article, headlined "Trump now has the power to forever alter Israel's character," establishes from the outset that the concern was about annexation's effect on Israel.

There are, it appears, two major concerns. Annexation will aggravate Israel's future relations with a post-Trump United States. It would alienate liberals and put bipartisan support for Israel at risk. The other major concern is that annexation would compromise the establishment a two-state solution in which Israel can remain a "Jewish democratic State." Here is Diehl:

"If there is no Palestine, Israel will be doomed to become a binational state rather than a Jewish one, or else adopt an apartheid system in which millions of Palestinians are ruled by Israel but lack full political rights."

There are several observations to be made in pointing out where this "analysis" falls short. In the first place, it ignores the fact that apartheid already is the current reality for Palestinians living under varying forms of oppressive Israeli rule in Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the rest of the West Bank. Despite having a "Palestinian Authority," Israel continues to conduct nightly raids into Palestinian cities, confiscate Arab-owned lands, and stifle Palestinian freedom and economic development by controlling all access and egress for Palestinians.

It also fails to recognise the hypocrisy of claiming that Israel can ever be both Jewish and democratic, a fact brought home by the racist campaign waged by Benjamin Netanyahu against the recently elected 15 members of Israel's Knesset from the Arab-led "Joint List." This incitement took the form of Netanyahu's claim that should his opponents have established a government with Arab support, it would be an illegitimate "minority government."

What the foreign policy establishment also fails to acknowledge is their responsibility for this mess. Their acquiescence, in and out of government, to Israeli settlement expansion, and their silence in the face of Israel's gross violations of Palestinian human rights are the reasons why there 650,000 settlers in the West Bank and what Israel calls "East Jerusalem", more than triple the number that existed when the current "peace process" began. Past administrations' failures to take effective measures to rein in these Israeli policies have created a sense of impunity, helping to move Israeli politics to where it is today. They have also contributed to weakening and discrediting Palestinian leadership leading to the dysfunctional situation in the Palestinian polity.

So spare me the crocodile tears or the nervous hand-wringing over the lost prospects of a two-state solution. That might have been possible 30 years ago, if the terms of the Oslo Accords had been honoured; they were ignored because Israel's refusal to honor its terms was not punished by the US "honest broker." What we have today is one-state, an Apartheid

State, with slightly more Arabs than Jews living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

Nor will we see the fulfillment of the "Deal of the Century" since that holds no promise for the Palestinians who will not accept a future as a people who will be permanently subordinate to Israel.

This is the reality created over the past 100 years since San Remo. And it will continue to be the reality until Palestinians are seen by Israeli Jews and US policymakers as equal human beings with full rights.

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