

Israel's "Existential Threats"

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The last few days have witnessed an inflection point in the history of Israel. It has effectively shed its democratic veneer and blatantly embraced its racist, fascist and colonialist ideology. I am referring to the passage of three bills in the Knesset. One would require loyalty oaths to maintain citizenship. A second states that citizens must recognize Israel as a Jewish state or else face up to one year in prison. And the third makes commemoration of the Nakba (Catastrophe – referring to the creation of Israel in 1948) a crime. (1) These come on the heels of PM Netanyahu's demands that the Palestinians must recognize Israel as a State for the Jewish People in return for "economic development."

These steps were all taken ostensibly to counteract Israel's "existential threats," which include the "demographic time bomb," being "surrounded by enemies," "anti-Semitism," and so forth. The "threat" to Israel is real. But *not* because of its proclaimed reasons. The central and unacknowledged "threat" is that it is natural and inevitable that there will be Resistance from the victims of Zionist praxis. Israel's "existential" dilemma can only be resolved within universal ethical parameters.

And yet, as outrageous and revolting as the above developments are, there is an underlying silver lining. Namely, the *quality* of Israel's conduct has now reached a new low from which it will be hard to emerge. These developments cap a demonstrated weakening of its overwhelming regional military power, both in terms of deterrence capacity and execution, which has resulted in its growing inability to use aggression in order to achieve political goals.

There is an irony in being unjust, racist, colonialist, expansionist, murderously brutal, and unapologetic and *still* expecting an "existential" free-ride. Adding insult to irony is that the above statement would be a moral and ethical given, but is frequently qualified or denied when applied to Israel. It is, after all, the only state to claim a "right to exist." There are two main reasons for this. First is Israel's self-designated status as the *sine qua non* Victim — historically, presently, existentially, and perpetually – placing it outside of moral equivalence. And second is the international balance of power (BOP) which accepts and encourages its actions because they often serve larger strategic goals.

Denying Palestinian Dispossession While Pursuing "Peace"-ful Solutions To "Existential Threats"

Israel and its sponsors have relied on a BOP approach to "peace" in order to address these "existential threats." Ever since its establishment in 1948, Israel has dominated the region militarily. This dominance made them useful to international powers – first England, then United States. Whatever "solution" the Israelis proposed served as the basis of a "peace" formula that was to be implemented. The most significant result has been the categorical

denial of the Nakba and of Israel's responsibility for dispossessing and uprooting the Palestinians.

From the outset, a solution was impossible because Israel made sure that, institutionally, the refugees do not exist. Fearing their repatriation, Israel insisted that the UN's International Refugee Organization (IRO) not be in charge of displaced Palestinians. Instead, the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA) was created. Its goal was *not* to ensure the return of refugees (their right, even under the UN's own General Assembly Resolution 194), but to provide humanitarian relief, employment, and shelter.

Within Israel, denial of dispossession was legally institutionalized through a series of land laws adopted in the Knesset. (2) Then, the 2001 Law for Safeguarding the Rejection of the Right of Return was passed. Knesset Member Yisrael Katz (Likud) introduced the bill saying: "The bill reflects a Zionist consensus not to allow Palestinians of 1948 and 1967 to return to the sovereign areas of the state of Israel... The bill... is non-partisan, Zionist, Jewish, Israeli, moral and historically justifiable... The right of return, a state of all its citizens—are expressions synonymous to the wish to destroy Israel..." (3)

Because Palestinians represent the antithesis of Zionism, they are the essential (known but unacknowledged) "existential threat" and Israel continuously attempts to erase and eradicate collective memory, especially among the real victims. That is the objective from the latest bill criminalizing Nakba commemorations. This is not the first time such a bill was introduced. A similar one was introduced on 24 July 2001 called the Proposed Independence Day (Amendment—Prohibition on Commemorating Nakba Day) Law. (4)

In fact, Israel went so far as to object even when UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, not known for his support of Palestinian rights, called Mahmoud 'Abbas and used the word "Nakba" when discussing the Nakba! Israel protested to the UN his choice of words and demanded that it be banned from the UN lexicon. Immediately complying, a UN spokesperson said that Moon had uttered term "by mistake." (5)

Moreover, there is a continuity to the Nakba. It supersedes the originally dispossessed. And the dispossession continues in various forms. Israel implements policies that de-develop Palestinian society and are intended to destroy human and material infrastructure, thereby "encouraging" Palestinians to leave. These include attempts at Judaizing almost everything, land expropriation, home demolitions, lack of investment in services and infrastructure for the Palestinian population, barriers and closures, and the building of "settlements," to name a few.

In a similar vein and in continuing efforts to stave off the "demographic time bomb," Israel has twice used massive Jewish immigrations (Mizrahis in 1949 and Ex-Soviet Union immigrants in the 1980s) in order to maintain Palestinians at below 20% of the population. Nevertheless, the balance is precarious and does not bode well for the future of a Jewish majority in Israel – especially with its insistence on not relinquishing any of the Occupied Territories. Even in Jerusalem, Israel's "spiritual" capital, Jewish residents are moving out at double the rate at which they are moving in. (6) And, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics "Special Report on the 61st Anniversary of the Nakba (5/13/2009), the Palestinian population has grown by seven times since 1948 and will be 50% of the population by 2016 within historical Palestine.

The Dead Cannot Carry the Dead (*el-mayyet ma bishil mayyet*)

Attempts to deny injustice done to Palestinians are part and parcel of Israel's defense strategy against its "existential threats." But without acknowledgement of the Nakba and its repercussions, the search for "peace" in accordance with the Israeli agenda is doomed. Because in reality, it is only addressing "threats" that are essentially derivative and symptomatic (and frequently fabricated in the minds of the self-appointed Victims). What is very significant in this writer's opinion is that the *quality* of Israeli arguments and actions to consecrate their self-proclaimed "existential" rights is deteriorating.

Initially and for a long time, Palestinians had no say in any negotiations concerning their fate. Others, like Egypt and Jordan, were chosen to speak for them. After that approach failed, there has been an endless search for "peace partners" focused mainly on those who benefit from the exclusion of the Palestinian people and who are amenable to limitless concessions. This approach is evident in the Israeli-Quartet insistence on dealing only with the term-expired 'Abbas government, specifically under the prime minister-ship of Salam Fayyad. Only this group is deemed worthy of "negotiating" (conceding) on behalf of all Palestinians.

While discouraging on the face of it, this actually represents a qualitative decline in Israeli options. The chosen "partner" is successively weaker. Netanyahu's supposed "carrot" of partial autonomy and economic development in return for ending the resistance and an acceptance of a State for the Jewish People falls under this rubric. And it is now directed at only a section of Fateh leadership within the PLO. Moreover, in attempting to re-define the Israeli state, the political argument is qualitatively deteriorating. In reality, a State of the Jewish People means that states do not recognize Israel as a state – as is normal – but as an ideology or religion or regime. Thus, Israel will sink further into the politically and ethically indefensible.

For now, Israel also seems to have halted its old means of protecting the Zionist entity: expansionism. After retreating from Egypt and Lebanon, today even Gaza and Hamas with their meager military resources are a challenge. Recognizing the shift in its BOP, Israel is focused on the pragmatically possible using its strong army, its nuclear arms arsenal, and the unconditional support of the US to protect against "existential threats." (Usually, these are only "threats" to its ambitions.)

Nevertheless, proof of the limits inherent in the BOP approach is that it is now resorting to asking Arab states (and Quislings) for help. Never mind that their powers are significantly inferior and their influence over most Palestinians is questionable at best. Most Palestinians refuse any retreat from their "fundamental" rights. (Obviously, I am excluding the Quisling members of Fateh in the PA from this group.) Notwithstanding the creation and use of joint "intelligence" and "security forces" groups between Arab states and Palestinian Quislings, there is still a lack of rhetorical and institutional mechanisms that can overcome Palestinian popular aspirations.

Truth be told, Arab "leaders" are trying to help by "updating" the "peace plan." They refused to exploit Israel's new defensive position, effectively leaving Iran as the only strategic "threat." According to the Palestinian Information Center, on 5/3/2009, American "security" envoy Keith Dayton announced that the US will help the Palestinian Authority construct 52 new prisons in the West Bank. Of course, this comes on the heels of Israeli Chief of the Armed Forces Gabi Ashkenazi stating that there was "rare cooperation"

between the PA and Israel during “Operation Cast Lead” against Gaza. Israeli press reports also spoke of “help” to foil resistance actions by Hamas and al-Jihad al-Islami, and Maariv said that Fayyad is trying his best to “improve” relations with Israel. (7)

Arab states also try to help in other ways – mainly economic. For instance, Egypt and Jordan have *increased* trade with Israel in the last year. In fact, according to Muhammad al-Khader’s “Companies added and removed from Israel Boycott List,” al-Jazeera (5/14/2009), Egyptian trade with Israel exceeds that with most Arab states and jumped 56% since the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada. And according to the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, Jordanian imports from Israel jumped 95% from 2007 to 2008 and Egyptian imports increased by 40% over the same period. (8) Similarly, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics reports that Palestinian exports to Israel increased 61% between 2004 and 2007 and imports from Israel increased 32% over the same period. (9)

For most Palestinians however, and despite the new wisdom proclaiming that “economic prosperity will bring peace,” resistance to the Israeli agenda is on the upswing. Even within the almost defunct and dead PLO, including Fateh, there is growing resistance. Calls rejecting the term-expired ‘Abbas presidency as well as rejecting the (US-Israeli-backed) Fayyad Government that was dictatorially created came from Hamas, Fateh rank-and-file, and some Fateh leadership. Al Jazeera reported on 5/15/09 the denunciations of ‘Abbas’ “unilateral” decision to announce a government without consultation and his “negotiations” and potential concessions with the Israelis over fundamental Palestinian issues. They criticized the strategy of trying to liberate Palestine under Israeli supervision and without armed struggle.

Other Fateh members accused ‘Abbas and Fayyad of conducting an “organizational butchery” through the forced retirement of over 6000 party cadres. They also object to the fact that Fateh’s budget is now in the hands of the Ministry of Finance, run by none other than Fayyad. These actions are perceived for what they are: attempts by dominant powers to marginalize and eliminate its role as a representative political party in favor of the appointed “leaders” who are to speak for and concede away Palestinian rights.

Agitation to maintain its dominant regional BOP position was also on display lately. Namely, conflating Palestinians with Terrorists and with the US’ newest bogeyman, Iran, the (claimed) Shi’i source of threat and conflict to all Sunni Arabs. (They forgot to mention that Palestinians Muslims are mainly Sunnis.) Sunnis are now asked to believe that Israel cares more for their welfare than their ancient (and historically peaceful) Iran. This is the latest version of an old tried and true method to counteract “existential threats.” Like the reliance on compliant “peace partners,” it has had questionable results.

Perhaps, this is a realization that in the event of Iran developing nuclear arms, one leg of Israel’s BOP’s three supports would be knocked off. Yet once again, Israel is reduced to resorting to Arab “leaders” to try to both quell Palestinian resistance (a feat that Israel could not accomplish) and to counteract Iran. The agitation against Hizbullah in Egypt and Lebanon and the use of Egyptian Intelligence offices to sponsor Hamas-Fateh “talks” (meant to minimize the threat of Hamas) fall under this rubric.

Even their campaign to make Iran the primary source of “danger” in the region is only a qualified success. Though the campaign succeeded in lowering Arab public opinion of Iran’s role somewhat, the vast majority of Arabs still consider the US and Israel to be the main danger. According to Shibley Telhami’s 2009 Arab Public Opinion Poll, only 18% think a

nuclear armed Iran would be “negative.” Asked which countries posed the biggest threat – 77% said the US, 88% said Israel, and only 13% said Iran. (10)

Very significantly for the future of the Arab-Israeli conflict is that post-Lebanon and Gaza, very few Arabs are impressed with Israel’s military performance or its power. In fact, between 2008 and 2009, the percentage of people who said that Israel is now more powerful, declined from 16% to 11% — and this is *after* its wanton destruction of Gaza. 44% think that it is neither powerful nor weak. And more people think that it is weaker than it looks. (11) Even though Arabs surveyed think that Israel “won” the Gaza war – unlike their opinion that it “lost” in Lebanon in 2006 – they are still not impressed with its power. (12) And when asked which world leaders were disliked the most, the overwhelming majority chose Sharon and then Olmert, followed by Bush and Blair, and a tiny portion chose Nasrallah. (13)

This leaves just one more leg under Israel’s dominance and that is unconditional US support. All Obama rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, this leg shows no practical signs of withering. Still, in terms of Balance of Power, this cannot create a stable status quo, despite this particular leg’s strength.

As for within the state of Israel, it too is being pushed towards confronting some internal contradictions that are becoming more blatant and that may force it to make unpleasant choices. In terms of its character it must decide on whether it wants to be secular or Jewish, democratic or racist, colonialist and expansionist or “peaceful.” Until only recently, Israel’s aggressive and usually triumphant choices reified their differences and imagined superiority over the other and served to hide societal differences that may have been threatening. But, one wonders how much longer this can go on in light of its failures to achieve its goals and its inability to translate its overwhelming military superiority into political achievements.

None of the above bodes well for the future of Israel as it confronts growing Arab resistance.

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NOTES

(1) Ironically, the bill criminalizing the commemoration of the Nakba was introduced by Knesset Member (KM) Alex Miller (Yisrael Beiteinu), who (without noting the hypocrisy) lives in the settlement of Ariel in the West Bank. He said “the bill will contribute to the coexistence and unity of the state.” Palestine Monitor, “Criminalizing Commemoration of al-Nakba”, 5/20/09).

(2) Ilan Pappé discusses these extensively in *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, (One World Press, 2006: pp. 212 – 253. The first is the 1950 Law of Absentee Property passed to prevent the return of refugees and take over Palestinian property in order to safeguard the “Jewishness” of the state via the services of the Jewish National Fund (JNF). The 1960 Law of the Land of Israel and the Law of the Israel Land Authority were reinforcement. Then the 1967 Law of Agricultural Settlement ensured that even subletting land to Palestinians was illegal. Practically, this entailed the de-development of Palestinian areas and the lack of investment in infrastructure in their areas. The result is that Palestinians now live on only 3% of the land even though they constitute 20% of the population.

- (3) Quoted in Nimer Sultany, *Citizens Without Citizenship*, al-Mada First Annual Report 2000-2002, p. 20.
- (4) Ibid, p. 44.
- (5) See Yizhak Binhoren, "Israel Demands that the UN strike "Nakba" from its lexicon," YNET, 5/16/08.
- (6) See <http://jiis.org/?cmd=datast.146&page=3&act=read&id=197> and <http://jiis.org/?cmd=datast.146&page=4&act=read&id=187>.
- (7) See: Wadee' 'Awawda, "Israeli Press: Israel and the PA cooperated during the war on Gaza, Al-Jazeera, 5/12/2009.
- (8) See http://www1.cbs.gov.il/www/fr_trade/td1.htm.
- (9) See <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabID=3565&lang=en>.
- (10) See p. 39 of the survey:
[http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2009/0519_arab_opinion/2009_arab_public_opinion_poll.\(pdf\)](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2009/0519_arab_opinion/2009_arab_public_opinion_poll.(pdf)).
- (11) Ibid, p. 28; and p. 17 of Telhami's presentation transcript:
http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2009/0519_arab_opinion/20090519_poll.pdf.
- (12) See p. 35 of survey and p. 20 of presentation transcript.
- (13) See p. 42 of survey.

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