

Israel's self-destruction: Reunifying the Palestinian nation

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Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, is in the United States this week, but few observers expect an immediate or significant breakthrough in the stalled peace talks with the Palestinian leadership.

In public, Mr Netanyahu maintains he is committed to the pledge he made last year, shortly after he formed his right-wing government, to work towards the creation of a demilitarised Palestinian state.

But so far he has proved either unwilling or unable to renew even a partial freeze on Jewish settlement building in the West Bank — a key condition set by Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, for reviving the negotiations.

Most of Mr Netanyahu's cabinet, including Avigdor Lieberman, his foreign minister, barely conceal their opposition to Palestinian statehood. Instead, Mr Netanyahu has imposed a precondition of his own: that the Palestinians recognise Israel as the state of the Jewish people.

A leading analyst of Palestinian politics says the picture is not as bleak for the Palestinians as it might appear.

Asad Ghanem, a professor of political science at Haifa University, predicts Mr Netanyahu and his cabinet will eventually come to rue their obduracy.

The intransigence and the unabashed espousal of "an ideology of Jewish supremacy" by Mr Netanyahu and his supporters will lead to the gradual "reunification" of the Palestinian people, Dr Ghanem said in an interview.

In clinging to a vision of Greater Israel, Mr Netanyahu and the right are fuelling a potentially powerful Palestinian nationalism that could yet come to crush not only the occupation but Israel's status as a Jewish state, said Dr Ghanem, the author of several books on Palestinian nationalism.

Dr Ghanem, who belongs to Israel's Palestinian minority, a fifth of the country's population, noted that the original goal of Israel's founders was to use a sophisticated version of divide-and-rule to weaken an emerging Palestinian national movement that opposed Zionism.

The war of 1948 that created Israel led to the first and most significant division: between the

minority of Palestinians who remained inside the new territory of Israel and the refugees forced outside its borders, who today are numbered in millions.

Since 1967, Israel has fostered many further splits: between the cities and rural areas; between the West Bank and Gaza; between East Jerusalem and the West Bank; between the main rival political movements, Fatah and Hamas; and between the PA leadership and the diaspora.

Israel's guiding principle has been to engender discord between Palestinians by putting the interests of each group into conflict, said Dr Ghanem. "A feuding Palestinian nation was never likely to be in a position to run its own affairs."

He is dismissive of plans by Mr Abbas and his prime minister, Salam Fayyad, to try to revive the Oslo process by bypassing Israel and seeking the international community's blessing for the establishment of a Palestinian state next summer.

Palestinian leaders who have pursued statehood, Dr Ghanem added, have done so on terms dictated by Israel.

First the rights of the refugees to be considered part of the Palestinian nation were sacrificed, then those of the Palestinians inside Israel. Next parts of East Jerusalem and all of Gaza were excluded. And now finally, he said, even significant parts of the West Bank were almost certain to be counted outside a future Palestinian state.

"The core of the negotiations for Abbas is about ending the occupation, but he has progressively conceded to Israel its very narrow definition of what constitutes occupied land. The rights of the refugees and other Palestinians to be included in the Palestinian nation now exist chiefly at the level of rhetoric."

The Israeli right's insistence on Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state would accelerate the unravelling of Israel's long-term policy of fragmenting the Palestinian people.

"All Palestinians are affected by such a demand, not just those living inside Israel. The Palestinian national movement accepted Israel as a state decades ago but Netanyahu is not satisfied by that.

"He wants to reopen the 1948 file," Dr Ghanem said, referring to the war that established Israel by expelling and dispossessing 80 per cent of the Palestinian people. "He is provoking the Palestinian national movement to reassess the accepted two-state model for ending the conflict."

As fewer and fewer Palestinians cling to the belief that Israel will ever agree to partition the territory, the physical and ideological barriers between the Palestinian sub-groups are starting to crumble, he said.

The separate struggles of the Palestinians — for civil rights among Israel's Palestinian minority; for national liberation by those in the occupied territories; and for the right of return among the diaspora — were being superseded by "a common fight against the reality of an ethnic apartheid".

Dr Ghanem added that, when Palestinians came to realise that they would never be offered more than a “crippled state” by Israel, the new paradigm would become “one binational, democratic state for all Palestinians and Jews in historic Palestine”.

The different Palestinian factions would eventually merge their political platforms. The civil rights movement rapidly emerging among Palestinians inside Israel would then serve to complement the fledgling anti-apartheid struggle in the occupied territories.

Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories, as well as the millions of refugees, said Dr Ghanem, would one day come to thank Mr Netanyahu for bringing them together.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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