

On 'Israel's Right to Exist'

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Almost two years after the most democratic elections ever held in the Arab world, as Palestinians struggle to survive in two disconnected and hostile fragments of historical Palestine, a besieged Gaza Strip and a coopted West Bank, with the enemies of the Palestinian people sending arms and funds to the side perceived as responsive to Israeli and Western wishes for use against the side perceived as representing Palestinian interests, the justification put forward by Israel, the United States and the European Union for their refusal to accept the result of the January 2006 elections, their determined efforts to overturn that result and their brutal collective punishment of the Palestinian people — the refusal of Hamas to “recognize Israel” or to “recognize Israel’s existence” or to “recognize Israel’s right to exist” — merits serious examination.

These three verbal formulations have been used by media, politicians and even diplomats interchangeably, as though they mean the same thing. They do not.

“Recognizing Israel” or any other state is a formal legal and diplomatic act by a state with respect to another state. It is inappropriate — indeed, nonsensical — to talk about a political party or movement extending diplomatic recognition to a state. To talk of Hamas “recognizing Israel” is simply to use sloppy, confusing and deceptive shorthand for the real demand being made.

“Recognizing Israel’s existence” appears on first impression to involve a relatively straightforward acknowledgement of a fact of life. Yet there are serious practical problems with this formulation. What Israel, within what borders, is involved? Is it the 55% of historical Palestine recommended for a Jewish state by the UN General Assembly in 1947? The 78% of historical Palestine occupied by the Zionist movement in 1948 and now viewed by most of the world as “Israel” or “Israel proper”? The 100% of historical Palestine occupied by Israel since June 1967 and shown as “Israel” (without any “Green Line”) on maps in Israeli schoolbooks? Israel has never defined its own borders, since doing so would necessarily place limits on them. Still, if this were all that was being demanded of Hamas, it might be possible for it to acknowledge, as a fact of life, that a State of Israel exists today within some specified borders.

“Recognizing Israel’s right to exist”, the actual demand, is in an entirely different league. This formulation does not address diplomatic formalities or a simple acceptance of present realities. It calls for a moral judgment.

There is an enormous difference between “recognizing Israel’s existence” and “recognizing Israel’s right to exist”. From a Palestinian perspective, the difference is in the same league as the difference between asking a Jew to acknowledge that the Holocaust happened and

asking him to concede that the Holocaust was morally justified. For Palestinians to acknowledge the occurrence of the Nakba — the expulsion of the great majority of Palestinians from their homeland between 1947 and 1949 — is one thing. For them to publicly concede that it was “right” for the Nakba to have happened is something else entirely. For the Jewish and Palestinian peoples, the Holocaust and the Nakba, respectively, represent catastrophes and injustices on an unimaginable scale that can neither be forgotten nor forgiven.

To demand that Palestinians recognize “Israel’s right to exist” is to demand that a people who have for almost 60 years been treated, and continue to be treated, as subhumans unworthy of basic human rights publicly proclaim that they are subhumans — and, at least implicitly, that they deserve what has been done, and continues to be done, to them. Even 19th century U.S. governments did not require the surviving Native Americans to publicly proclaim the “rightness” of their ethnic cleansing by the European colonists as a condition precedent to even discussing what sort of reservation might be set aside for them — under economic blockade and threat of starvation until they shed whatever pride they had left and conceded the point.

Some believe that Yasser Arafat did concede the point in order to buy his ticket out of the wilderness of demonization and earn the right to be lectured directly by the Americans. In fact, in his famous statement in Stockholm in late 1988, he accepted “Israel’s right to exist in peace and security”. This formulation, significantly, addresses the conditions of existence of a state which, as a matter of fact, exists. It does not address the existential question of the “rightness” of the dispossession and dispersal of the Palestinian people from their homeland to make way for another people coming from abroad.

The original conception of the formulation “Israel’s right to exist” and of its utility as an excuse for not talking with any Palestinian leadership which still stood up for the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people are attributed to Henry Kissinger, the grand master of diplomatic cynicism. There can be little doubt that those states which still employ this formulation do so in full consciousness of what it entails, morally and psychologically, for the Palestinian people and for the same cynical purpose — as a roadblock against any progress toward peace and justice in Israel/Palestine and as a way of helping to buy more time for Israel to create more “facts on the ground” while blaming the Palestinians for their own suffering.

However, many private citizens of good will and decent values may well be taken in by the surface simplicity of the words “Israel’s right to exist” (and even more easily by the other two shorthand formulations) into believing that they constitute a self-evidently reasonable demand and that refusing such a reasonable demand must represent perversity (or a “terrorist ideology”) rather than a need to cling to their self-respect and dignity as full-fledged human beings which is deeply felt and thoroughly understandable in the hearts and minds of a long-abused people who have been stripped of almost everything else that makes life worth living.

That this is so is evidenced by polls showing that the percentage of the Palestinian population which approves of Hamas’ steadfastness in refusing to bow to this humiliating demand by the enemies of the Palestinian people, notwithstanding the intensity of the economic pain and suffering inflicted on them, substantially exceeds the percentage of the population which voted for Hamas in January 2006.

Those who recognize the critical importance of Israeli-Palestinian peace and truly seek a decent future for both peoples must recognize that the demand that Hamas recognize “Israel’s right to exist” is unreasonable, immoral and impossible to meet. Then they must insist that this roadblock to peace be removed, that the siege of the Gaza Strip be lifted and that justice — not simply “peace”, which can be a euphemism for the successful repression of resistance to injustice — be pursued, with the urgency it deserves, with all legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people.

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