

Solving Palestine While Israel Destroys It

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Global Research, April 16, 2009

Counterpunch.org 16 April 2009

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To a greater degree than perhaps ever before, Washington today is engulfed in denial about Israel and its stupefying behavior, about its murderous policies toward the Palestinians, about the efforts of Israel and its U.S. defenders to force us to ignore its atrocities. Blinders have always been part of the attire of U.S. policymakers and politicians with regard to Israel and Israeli actions, but in the wake of the three-week Israeli assault that laid waste to the tiny territory of Gaza — an assault ended very conveniently just before Barack Obama was inaugurated, so that he has been able to act as though it never occurred — the perspective from which Washington operates is strikingly more blinkered than ever in the past.

At a symposium on Capitol Hill sponsored by the Middle East Policy Council just days before Obama took office, Ali Abunimah, a sharp Palestinian-American commentator who runs the website ElectronicIntifada.net, declared frankly that Washington exists in a bubble of ignorance and denial. While the rest of the world, particularly at the level of civil society, is talking about war crimes tribunals for Israeli leaders and about sanctions against Israel, Abunimah observed, Washington and those world leaders beholden to it are trying to move ahead as if nothing had changed. “We have to expect,” he said, “that the official apparatus of the peace-process industry — the Hillary Clintons, the Quartets, the Tony Blairs, the Javier Solanas, the Ban Ki-Moons, the whole panoply of official and semi-official Washington think tanks — will carry on with business as usual, trying to make believe that, through their ministrations, a Palestinian state will come into being.” But in the real world, this state won’t happen, he said, and the time has come to speak frankly about what is going on.

So far, three months into the Obama administration, there is little evidence that Obama sees clearly or is ready to speak frankly. Another very savvy Palestinian political commentator and activist, Haidar Eid, who lives and endures Israel’s constant punishments in Gaza, recently told an interviewer that the international reaction to Israel’s Gaza assault was like the reaction to some kind of natural disaster — as if no human hand had had a role in the destruction and nothing but money and aid was required to resolve the problem. As if, he said, the disaster had not been “created by the state of Israel to annihilate the Palestinian resistance and Palestinian society.”

Eid was commenting on an international conference of donors that convened in Sharm el-Sheikh in early March and made themselves feel magnanimous by pledging almost \$5 billion in aid to relieve the “humanitarian crisis” in Gaza — but not to do anything to resolve the political reality of Israeli occupation that is at the root of Gaza’s humanitarian plight. The donors — the same “peace-process industry” leaders Abunimah spoke of — were there only to pretend concern and to dole out money, always the easiest way in the minds of political elites to make messy human problems go away. Thus do they relieve their own consciences and at the same time tell Israel it can proceed with impunity to destroy Palestine and Palestinians; the international community will pick up the pieces and pick up the tab. Israel

has not failed to get the picture.

Any thought of forcing Israel to cease its gross oppression of Palestinians, any thought of doing anything to deprive Israel of the *carte blanche* it enjoys, was apparently beyond these do-gooders. Any realization that their aid pledge was merely part of an endless destructive cycle was also lost on them — a cycle in which these same donors, led by the United States, arm Israel with the world's most advanced weapons and the absolute political power that comes with the weapons, and Israel then uses the arms and the political license to destroy the Palestinians, and the donors convene again to pay to repair the destruction. The hypocrisy was further underlined by the firm U.S. demand that, before Gazans receive any of this international largesse, Hamas must recognize Israel's right to exist — in other words, Hamas must recognize the right to exist of the very state that just tried to destroy it and its people, and even the land they live on.

Were Israel's behavior not so loathsome, the U.S. and international denial would be something to laugh at. But the aid pledge and the endless loop of Western-financed misery — and the myopia they signify — together constitute but one striking example of the willful ignorance, arising from a thought process wholly oriented toward Israel's perspective, from which the United States and the international community always approach this conflict. The end of George W. Bush's long tenure and the advent of Barack Obama have now given rise to other initiatives that are as naïve and myopic as the aid pledges — myopic because, wittingly or not, they come from a starting point that is totally centered on Israel and its demands and totally oblivious to Israel's barbaric behavior.

Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton speak earnestly of the “inevitability” and the “inescapability” of a solution based on two states, without regard to the growing impossibility of a real Palestinian state or to the fact that Israel is killing off any prospect for such a state and is in fact openly killing off the Palestinians. The early months of the administration, and the appointment of George Mitchell as special Middle East envoy, are bringing out others who, more enamored of the process than of any prospect of genuine peace, blindly pursue the “peace-process industry” regardless of realities on the ground or the virtual guarantee of failure.

Probably the most detailed plan purporting to lay out a path toward a two-state solution was actually written before Obama took office and is only now being publicized. This plan — entitled “[A Last Chance for a Two-State Israel-Palestine Agreement](#)” — was drawn up in December by a group of well meaning U.S. elder statesmen, including Brent Scowcroft, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Lee Hamilton, and Paul Volcker, the only one of the ten to enter the Obama administration. The elders were drawn together by Henry Seigman, a former head of the American Jewish Committee and scholar of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict who has distinguished himself in recent years by his frank, realistic criticism of the Israeli occupation.

The proposal is a 17-page blueprint for achieving the impossible. It approaches the conflict from an Israel-centered perspective and indeed, by heavily emphasizing the need to meet Israel's security needs, contains the prescription for its own failure. The report devotes a remarkable one-fifth of its entire length to an annex on “Addressing Israel's Security Challenges,” in addition to considerable verbiage devoted to this subject in the body of the document. There is no mention whatsoever of any need to ensure Palestine's security against threats from Israel.

The impulse behind this plan is admirable: it recognizes the centrality of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to other issues and U.S. interests in the Middle East; it urges that the new administration overturn the Bush administration's eight years of disengagement from the conflict and do so quickly; it calls for engaging Hamas; and it urges that the peace effort be undertaken even at the cost of angering "certain domestic constituencies." But the plan itself is naïve and oblivious to the brutal realities of the situation, which existed even before the Gaza assault. Because it takes no account of Israel's lethal intentions toward the Palestinians or its responsibility for the current level of violence, the report actually encourages Israeli intransigence while blithely assuming that this rigidity can be overcome by issuing a plan on a few pieces of paper while the U.S. continues to send Israel the arms necessary to destroy Palestine.

The report exists in a never-never land in which Israel has no responsibility for occupying Palestinian land and has concerns only for its own security but no obligations to the Palestinians. The report refers repeatedly to the "chicken and egg" security situation in the occupied territories — as if it cannot be determined whether Israel's occupation or Palestinian resistance to it came first, as if the occupation is not the reason for Palestinian resistance, as if the Palestinian suicide bombings that the report says cause Israel "understandable anxiety" might have arisen out of nowhere rather than precisely out of Israel's oppression.

The plan addresses the requirements of peace between the two envisioned states almost solely in terms of Israel's needs — not only its security needs, but its settlements needs and its concerns about Palestinian refugees' right of return. For instance, while it calls for the border between the two states to be "based on" the lines of June 1967 with only minor reciprocal modifications, it recommends that the United States "take into account areas heavily populated by Israelis in the West Bank." Although the language minimizes the magnitude of this issue, this passage means that accommodation must be made for major Israeli settlement blocs, which include approximately ten percent of the small Delaware-sized West Bank, cover virtually the entirety of East Jerusalem, and include fully 85 percent of the 475,000 settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

In April 2004, George Bush gave Ariel Sharon a letter that officially granted U.S. approval to Israel's retention of what Bush called "major [Jewish] population centers" in the West Bank, thus altering what had been almost 40 years of U.S. policy supporting a virtually full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories. Bill Clinton's "parameters" outlined in 2000 had done the same on a somewhat smaller scale by proposing to allow Israel to retain its settlements — referred to by the anodyne term "neighborhoods" — in East Jerusalem. The latest proposal by the elder statesmen repeats this Clinton dictum and in general endorses both Clinton's and Bush's declarations unilaterally ceding Palestinian land to Israel, without negotiation or consultation with Palestinians.

This proposal also gives away the Palestinians' right of return. Although it gives a nod to the refugees' "sense of injustice" and calls for "meaningful financial compensation," it declares, again unilaterally and pre-emptively, that resolution of the refugee problem should "protect Israel from an influx of refugees" — meaning that the right would not be available to all or even most refugees who might choose to return to the homes and land inside Israel from which they were expelled. This provision would "protect" Israel from any requirement that it rectify the massive injustice it perpetrated in 1948 and would require that the victims be satisfied, after 60-plus years, with a little money and a home somewhere outside their own homeland.

The major element of the elders' report proposes that the Palestinian state would be non-militarized and would be policed by a U.S.-led, UN-mandated multinational force that would function for five years but would have a renewable mandate, the intention being to permit Palestinians to control their own security affairs (and of course be able to guarantee Israel's security) within 15 years. The force would be a NATO force supplemented by Jordanian, Egyptian and — amazingly enough — *Israeli* troops. The Alice-in-Wonderland aspect of this particular proposal is the elders' assumption that Palestinian sovereignty would somehow be respected even as the Palestinians were being forced to turn their security over to a multinational force that included not merely elements of multiple outside armies, but troops from the very oppressor the Palestinians are presumed to have just shed by attaining statehood. This is the kind of "peace-process industry" nonsense that renders proposals such as this utterly meaningless.

The proposal gives away, before negotiations have begun, more than any state-to-be could ever possibly afford to give. It cedes territory in what would be the Palestinian state before Palestinians are even able to sit down at the negotiating table. It cedes, without cavil or apology, the Palestinians' right to redress of a gross injustice that is, and has been from the beginning 60-plus years ago, the fundamental Palestinian grievance against Israel. It cedes Palestinian sovereignty and security by inviting in an international security force including troops of precisely the occupying force that the Palestinians seek to be rid off. And it cedes any viability in the new so-called state.

The elders who composed this document should know better. Some of them have actually worked as specialists on the Arab-Israeli conflict in the past, and the proposal's convener Henry Siegman has been working on this issue for decades. But the proposal exhibits so little understanding of the extent to which Israel has already absorbed the West Bank into itself that it would appear that none of these individuals has ever even visited the region. Nor, in its blithe assessment that it will be possible to induce Israel to agree to any withdrawal at all from the occupied territories, is there much understanding that no Israeli government of any political stripe, and particularly none of the rightwing governments that have led Israel for the last decade and more, has any intention of permitting the Palestinians any degree of true independence and sovereignty anywhere in Palestine.

Finally, just like the donors' conference that treated the Gaza disaster as if some natural force beyond human control had descended like a hurricane on the territory, this proposal gives no sign of recognition that Israel is the responsible party in this conflict. Israel is the party with all the power, controlling all the territory; Israel is the party that is in occupation over the Palestinians, in defiance of international law; Israel is the party that demolishes homes, bombs civilian residential neighborhoods, drops white phosphorus on civilians, imposes checkpoints and roadblocks and other movement restrictions, builds walls to close off Palestinians, blocks imports of food to an entire Palestinian population, confiscates land to build settlements and roads for Israeli Jews only. Israel is the party that has carried out 85 percent of the killings in the conflict since the *intifada* began eight and a half years ago.

But the ignorance of these statesmen and their denial of the realities of Israeli occupation, Israeli brutality, Israeli aggression are indicative of just how much Israel is able to get away with in the atmosphere of adulation for Israel that prevails in the United States. One wonders, in fact, if these people are truly as ignorant as they seem to be of what is going on, with U.S. facilitation, in Palestine. Do they believe it is all right and that it advances U.S. national interests in some way to continue arming Israel and grant it total carte blanche to continue oppressing Palestinians? Or have they been so sucked into the Israel-centered

discourse in this country that they are literally afraid to oppose Israel and confront its U.S. lobbyists?

The house of cards that is the “peace-process industry” that Abunimah referred to — that house of cards that pretends Israel is not a rogue nation rampaging through its neighborhood whenever it feels like it — must soon collapse. As Abunimah told the Capitol Hill conference, what people know in Europe and in Chicago, where he lives and works, is quite different from what people in Washington and New York think they know and, as he noted, silence about the realities on the ground in Palestine is no longer an option. When the history of this period is written, Abunimah said, “Gaza will be seen as the moment after which it became impossible for Israel to be integrated into the region as a so-called Jewish-Zionist state.”

Kathleen and Bill Christison have been writing on the Middle East for several years and have co-authored a book, forthcoming in June from Pluto Press, on the Israeli occupation and its impact on Palestinians. Thirty years ago, they were analysts for the CIA. They can be reached at kb.christison@earthlink.net.

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