

The two-state solution, Israeli-style

Charity, checkpoints and client rulers

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Ramallah. Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, has been much criticised in Israel, as well as abroad, for failing to present his own diplomatic initiative on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to forestall US intervention.

Mr Netanyahu may have huffed and puffed before giving voice to the phrase "two states for two peoples" at Sunday's cabinet meeting, but the contours of just such a Palestinian state — or states — have been emerging undisturbed for some time.

In fact, Mr Netanyahu appears every bit as committed as his predecessors to creating the facts of an Israeli-imposed two-state solution, one he and others in Israel's leadership doubtless hope will eventually be adopted by the White House as the "pragmatic" — if far from ideal — option.

While Israel has been buying yet more time with Washington in bickering over a paltry settlement freeze, it has been forging ahead with the process of creating two Palestinian territories, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, that, despite supposedly emerging from occupation, are in reality sinking ever deeper into chronic dependency on Israeli goodwill.

This is creating a culture of absolute Israeli control and absolute Palestinian dependency, enforced by proxy Palestinian rulers acting as mini-dictatorships.

For a growing number of Palestinians, the conditions of bare subsistence and even survival are Israeli gifts that few can afford to spurn through political activity, let alone civil disobedience or armed resistance. The Palestinian will to organise and resist as their land is seized for settlements is being inexorably sapped.

It is little mentioned but Israel all but abandoned completing its massive separation wall in the West Bank some time ago. There are significant gaps waiting to be filled, but, with things having grown so quiet and the cost of each kilometre of wall so high, the sense of political and military urgency has evaporated.

Suicide bombers, had they the determination, could still slip into Israel. But increasingly Palestinians view such attacks as futile, if not counterproductive: Israel simply wins greater international sympathy and has the pretext to turn the screw yet tighter on Palestinian life.

None of this has been lost on Israel's leaders of either the so-called Left or Right.

Rather than being an aberration in response to rocket attacks, the blockade of Gaza has

become Israel's template for Palestinian statehood. The West Bank is rapidly undergoing its own version of disengagement and besiegement, with similar predictable results.

Gaza's blockade — and the savage battering it took in December and January — has suggested even to Mr Netanyahu that the Israeli version of the carrot-and-stick approach works.

The stick — a devastated Gaza unable to rise from the rubble because aid and basic goods are kept out — has transformed most of the population into a nation dependent on handouts, borrowing where possible to buy necessities smuggled through the tunnels, and concentrating on the lonely art of survival.

As the normally restrained International Committee of the Red Cross reported last month: "Most of the very poor have exhausted their coping mechanisms. Many have no savings left. They have sold private belongings such as jewellery and furniture and started to sell productive assets including farm animals, land, fishing boats or cars used as taxis."

The carrot — if it can be called that — is directed towards Gaza's leaders, Hamas, rather than its ordinary inhabitants. The message is simple: keep the rocket fire in check and we won't attack again. We will allow you to rule over the remnants of Gaza.

In the West Bank, the carrot for the leadership is even more tantalisingly visible. The Palestinian Authority under Mahmoud Abbas is colluding in the creation of a series of mini-fiefdoms based on the main cities.

Trained by the US military, Palestinian security forces with light weapons are taking back control of Jenin, Nablus, Jericho, Qalqilya, Ramallah and so on, while the PA is encouraged by promises of economic charity to prop up its legitimacy.

The leader of a Palestinian non-governmental organisation in Ramallah confided at the weekend that what is being created are "City Leagues" — a mocking reference to the Palestinian regional militias known as the Village Leagues armed by Israel in the early 1980s to stamp out Palestinian nationalism by threatening and attacking local political activists. Those were a dismal failure; this time Palestinians are less sure Israel will not succeed.

Palestinian prisons are starting to fill not only with those suspected of belonging to Hamas but those who dissent from Fatah rule. The ground is being carefully tended by Israel to create a brutal client state.

The stick, as in Gaza, is directed at the ordinary population. The news headlines are of the easing of movement restrictions at the checkpoints. That may be true at a few places deep in the West Bank. But at the big checkpoints that separate Israel from what is left of the West Bank, such as the one at Qalandiya between Ramallah and Jerusalem, the monitoring of Palestinian movement is becoming fearsomely sophisticated.

These checkpoints are now more like small airport terminals, with limited numbers of "trusted" Palestinians entitled to pass through. To escape the poverty of the West Bank each day to reach manual work inside Israel, they must have a magnetic ID card storing biometric data and a special permit. Cards are denied by Israel not only to those with a record of political activity but also to those who have distant relatives deemed to be

politically engaged.

The same NGO leader concluded, again with bitter irony: "Our leaders are declaring victory: the victory of defeat."

Should Mr Abbas and his PA functionaries sign up to this Israeli vision of statehood, the defeat for the Palestinians will be greater still.

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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