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Israel's pariah status

ISRAEL IS NOT ALONE in being a state founded in the midst of massacres, and the dispossession and/or expulsion of entire populations. Turkey, Poland, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka spring readily to mind and if one wanted to take a longer view we could look at the history of the United States, Australia, and Great Britain; massacres and ethnic cleansing lie at the foundation of many, if not most, nation states in the world.

Yet, Israel has earned a place, which is almost unique in being quite so widely reviled for its brutality and human rights abuses which when practiced on a bloodier and much larger scale in Sri Lanka or Russia's Caucasus pass more or less unnoticed – or if not exactly unnoticed, like the actions of the Sudanese state in Darfur, have never become a *cause célèbre* for mass protest movements around the world.

Israel was not always in this unique position. Indeed, until 1967, many people regarded Israel as both a model democracy and as a normal state. Zionism had socialist and progressive credentials that had apparently survived Israel's War of Independence in 1948-9 and the Suez Crisis of 1956 more or less unscathed. Then came the Six-Day War in 1967 in which Israel was confronted by a coalition of Arab armies from Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, supported by Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria. Israel won hands down, and, in less than a week, it transformed itself from a victim into a regional power ruling over occupied Arab territories and their Arab populations. This view was consolidated six years later in the much tougher circumstances of the Yom Kippur War in which Israel, after serious initial losses, succeeded in soundly defeating a surprise

attack coordinated by both Egypt and Syria, and supported by many other states in the region.

Israel was evidently a power to be reckoned with having emerged victorious in all major military engagements with Arab armies. Such compelling evidence of Israel's military prowess when combined with the gradual emergence during the nineteen sixties of Palestinian national consciousness, and of a Palestinian national movement, particularly in the territories occupied by Israel after 1967, began Israel's long descent into pariah status. Israel was a state manifestly fighting for its survival in which the entire population could be readily mobilised to defend the homeland at the drop of a hat.

These are the circumstances in which the progressive aspects of Zionism, its socialistic flavour, and its commitment to human rights and liberal principles have been steadily eroded. War in any state – Britain and America during the Second World War for example – results in the suspension of many democratic rights, it results in mass internments, the suppression of freedom of movement, organisation, and the press. The problem for Israel has been that this situation is anything but temporary – the building of walls, the staffing of checkpoints and military posts, the emergence of clear distinctions between citizens who can be trusted and those who cannot, and the distinction between citizens who consent to being ruled, and those subjects of the state who do not, have become, with every year that has passed, more and more important.

Since 1967 the right of Israel to exist has been widely questioned – its very legitimacy as a state is challenged by more or less all of its neighbours and by many peoples and governments further afield. This has driven a wedge deeper and deeper into Israeli society as its public and political life has drifted over the years, further and further to the right; through all the ups and downs of Israeli politics and its bewildering array of fractious political parties, and coalitions, those disposed to more liberal policies have

lost out to irredentist trends laying claim to the entire West Bank and even to the territory of the Kingdom of Jordan. Many fundamentalist Jews can see no reason why any Arabs at all should be allowed to live in *Eretz Yisrael* – the land promised by God to the Jews. Benjamin Netanyahu's government falls some way short of such extreme positions but his preparedness to play fast and loose with Israel's religious right, his preparedness to allow them to 'create facts on the ground' by increasing the size of Jewish settlements on the West Bank and in Jerusalem, reveals the character of his government and the state of Israeli politics like nothing else.

Israel finds itself in a permanent state of war; it faces existential threats on all sides. This is not an imaginary state of affairs. It is indisputably true; Iran and a number of other states openly seek its destruction. They advocate the abolition of Israel, and their threats are anything but idle. Hamas and Hezbollah seek the destruction of Israel and are explicitly committed to killing Jews, and to declaring Palestine "from the River to the Sea" free of Jews and of their Jewish state. Hezbollah's Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah, is on record pledging never to recognise Israel: "I am against any reconciliation with Israel. I do not even recognise the presence of a state that is called 'Israel'". However, they have been less than consistent in their published statements and programmes, sometimes including, and sometimes omitting, their commitment to the destruction of Israel as the mood and political circumstances suited them.

This is not the case, however, with Hamas, the de facto state authorities in Gaza. In their 1988 Charter they reveal that destroying Israel and killing Jews is a central component of their divine mission. These are not simply policy statements that can be shelved or discarded; hating and killing Jews, and believing in the destruction of Israel, is their *raison d'être*. Hamas are prepared to contemplate a *hudna* or ceasefire with Israel in return for a Palestinian State 'within the 1967 boundaries' with its capital in East Jerusalem and the

'right of return' for all Palestinians (and their descendants) who fled in 1948/9 from the lands that now form the territory of Israel *proper*. These conditions, as Hamas is well aware, would result in the destruction of the State of Israel and would consequently not be acceptable to any Israeli government.

Israel, on the other hand, is prepared to negotiate a settlement, which would involve some land swaps and would preserve a significant number of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Israel would make no concessions on Jerusalem, which would remain entirely within their sovereign territory as the capital of their state. It would reject the right of Palestinian Arabs to return to Israel *proper* and would seek to ensure that any Palestinian state owed both its sovereignty and its security to Israel who would, as a matter of course, reject the Palestinian's need for any armed forces greater than police and militia maintained for internal security; Israel's version of the "Two State Solution" is evidently, really a "One and a Half State Solution" which would not be acceptable to any conceivable Palestinian leadership.

Recently, entirely inappropriate comparisons have been made with the North of Ireland. Ignoring entirely the fact that Irish Republicans although absolutely committed to the eventual unification of a sovereign Irish State, have never been committed to the destruction of the British State nor have they advocated massacring Northern Ireland's Protestants, or the British people in general. The outlook of Irish Republicans towards Unionists and to the British, even the outlook of the 'Continuity IRA', is radically different from that of Hezbollah or Hamas or of the Iranian State towards Israel in particular and to Jews in general. There is no basis for a settlement or for negotiations between these irreconcilable enemies.

Because most Israelis and their government see the struggle between Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, on the one hand, and Israel on the other, as an existential struggle in which defeat would result in the end of

Israel and the massacre and/or expulsion of the Jews they boldly support the blockade of Gaza and any and all measures taken by the Israel Defense Force against Islamist military formations that threaten them and their children.

Into this War, Palestinian solidarity and peace campaigners of one sort or another have mobilised against Israel by highlighting the manifest suffering and oppression of Palestinians in Gaza, and on the West Bank. Their *raison d'être* has been to relieve the suffering of the Palestinian civilian population battered by war, blockades, and by economic disintegration. They are, of course, far from neutral. They drape themselves in Palestinian flags, and fedayeen scarves, they support "the right of the oppressed to fight back against the oppressor"; they support Hamas and Hezbollah – as, in moments of great excitement, they shout: "Viva Palestina!" and "We are all Palestinians Now!"

Most recently, the Free Gaza Movement has been striving, by running the Israeli blockade of Gaza, to free up the right of Hamas to import anything it likes into the territory. The Government of Israel knows, however, that this would include missiles and other war materials for use in random attacks against Israel and her citizens. The peace campaigners point to the wheelchairs, the baby food, the medicines and building cement, and insist that no weapons are carried aboard their ships. This is all, undoubtedly true, but it is beside the point, because no one can be in any doubt that if the blockade of Gaza is lifted, Hamas would immediately replenish its arsenal of guns and rockets for the continuation of its war with Israel.

Consequently, my advice to those interested in matters humanitarian is to work out a way of ensuring that Israel widens the categories of things that can be imported into Gaza, and supports an Israeli ban on the import of weapons and related materials. This could be done in a number of different ways through third-party negotiations, or by the insertion of an international force to guarantee Israel's security from

attacks by Hamas. However, nothing of the sort can be achieved by implicitly allying oneself with Hamas, by boycotting Israel, or by encouraging the diplomatic isolation of Israel.

The War cannot be brought to an end by supporting those who seek the destruction of Israel. Similarly, the War cannot be brought to an end by supporting Israel's right wing and the Jewish religious zealots who seek nothing less than the expulsion of Arabs from Israel and the West Bank. The War cannot be brought to an end by Israeli governments committed to the deployment of overwhelming violence against any threat to the security of its citizens, however slight.

The War can only be brought to an end by strengthening the progressive forces inside Israel and the progressive forces within the Palestinian community. If the United States, the European Union, and the Palestinian solidarity and peace movements, adopt any other strategy there will simply be war without end in the lands of Israel and Palestine.