



# Palestine: the Impossible Vindication

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These days we are witnessing a new outbreak of the extremely unequal war between Gaza and Israel, where military victory is assured in advance. This conflict will not cause refugees because, unlike other people, Gaza's civilian population has nowhere to go. Israel's total control of Gaza's borders, combined with Egypt's determination not to become another Lebanon by receiving Palestinians, makes this region a prison for its inhabitants.

## **When All Options Get Worse**

Without justice there can be no peace in the region and, if peace ever came, it would be nothing more than capitulation by one of the two sides. It is true that very few countries would feel comfortable

with a neighbor dominated by Hamas, but Israel's politics has guaranteed time and again that in periods of truce the Palestinians gain nothing through dialogue. On the contrary, for years their negotiating position has become ever weaker. They have achieved nothing in peacetime, nor has any intifada brought them any progress. Even now, launching thousands of missiles from Gaza will do nothing to improve the situation of the Palestinians. The only thing they achieve is expressing their rage at a situation of constant degradation. With its bombing, Israel wants to make it clear that any attack on it will be answered with a severity that will leave the adversary in an even worse situation. Nevertheless, the constant erosion of Palestinian rights in times of truce makes any option, whether dialogue or war, a terrible choice. There

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seems to be no other alternative: either being slowly expelled or dying quickly in the struggle.

The reality we confront today is the unfeasibility of a Palestinian state. The fragmentation of Palestinian territory as the result of thousands of Jewish settlements and the physical separation of one part from the other make this option impossible.

Not a few Palestinians today regret that their leaders did not accept the conditions that Israel once demanded, but the wound caused by the occupation and the unequal distribution of land in 1947, and even more so in 1967, made acceptance almost impossible. Many Palestinians today would go back to the borders of 1967, but that is no longer possible. The settlements in the West Bank contain more than 400,000 Israelis, not counting the large number who live in East Jerusalem.

## **Arab Countries, Tired of Waiting**

The Arab countries, moreover, have grown tired of waiting for resolution of the conflict in order to look after their own interests, and they have turned their backs on the Palestinian cause. In September 2020, the United Arab Emirates signed agreements to restore diplomatic relations with Israel, with the support of the United States and Saudi Arabia. The Saudis have no qualms about discreetly cooperating with Israel and encouraging its neighbors to establish diplomatic relations because such a move further isolates Iran, which is seen by Saudi Arabia as its greatest threat. The recent boycott of Qatar by these countries was motivated by Qatar's approach to Iran, its support of the Muslim Brotherhood,

and its hosting of the headquarters of the heterodox Al-Jazeera news channel. If we consider that the party holding power in Gaza is Hamas, that Hamas is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, and that the Al-Jazeera tower in Gaza was bombed by Israel in the latest conflict, we can better understand the alliances in the region.

Another key country in the region, Egypt, will not support the Palestinians in Gaza because its president and dictator, al-Sisi, prioritizes the fight against the Muslim Brotherhood, which he overthrew in a coup. This animosity brings him closer to Saudi Arabia, while economic interests persuade him to maintain the peace treaties signed with Israel in 1979.

Morocco has been the latest country to normalize diplomatic relations with Israel in exchange for Trump's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara. It was one of his last gifts to both Israel and Morocco, just before the end of his term.

However, Israel's bombing of Gaza in May has been a real acid test for those relations. Morocco and Jordan are particularly uneasy. Jordan is especially disturbed because it recalls the internal destabilization caused by the Palestinian refugees who demanded greater military involvement on the part of Jordan against Israel. This history helps explain why Arab governments, despite massive popular support for the Palestinian cause, have begun to look after their own interests by seeking rapprochement with Israel and even normalization of diplomatic relations.

The axis of Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, and Iran

The only country that has followed a contrary path in recent years has been

Turkey, motivated by its desire to regain influence in its former domains and to stop looking toward Europe and the United States. Thus, an axis of cooperation and solidarity has been formed among Palestine, Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Lebanon (especially the coalition of the Shiite Hezbollah—in its political and military arm—and the Christian General Aoun).

## **A Long Confrontation**

How did we get here? Let us remember that in 1948, under the auspices of the United Nations, the territory was divided very unequally: the State of Israel was created with the prospect of also creating a Palestinian state, but this never materialized. The 1967 Six-Day War led Israel to incorporate into its territory the Golan Heights of Syria, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the Sinai Peninsula. Egypt recovered Sinai in exchange for a peace treaty. Israel offered the Palestinians new borders in order to seal the peace, but the wound opened by the occupied lands prevented them from accepting the deal. In 1993, the Oslo Accords meant that for the first time Palestine recognized Israel's right to exist, and Israel formally recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization as an interlocutor. The PLO was to organize elections and to maintain security in its territory with its own police. The treaty divided the West Bank into three zones: zone A was under exclusive Palestinian protection; zone B was under joint protection, but Israel could deploy its army there; and zone C was under the absolute control of Israel. The areas in zone A were isolated from each other, and Hamas's victory in Gaza after the elec-

tions separated it politically from the West Bank, which remained under the Palestinian National Authority (PNA).

Despite these negative factors, the Oslo Accords were very close to fulfillment, but some important issues remained: the status of Jerusalem (the holy city of the three religions), the dismantling of Jewish settlements, the definition of future borders, and the return of refugees. (There are two million refugees in Jordan, more than a half million in pre-war Syria, and a half million in Lebanon; besides these there are the Palestinians expelled from their lands and now taking refuge in Palestine: 1,200,000 in Gaza and 900,000 in the West Bank.)

The only significant advance since then has been the granting of observer status in the United Nations to Palestine in 2012. However, because it is not truly a state, it cannot effectively manage the few territories in zone A. Its inhabitants live as prisoners confined to the boundaries of their cities. Meanwhile, settlements in the mixed areas are gaining more territory for the Jews, who continue to buy land and houses whenever they can in order to confine the Palestinians further. The conflict in May stemmed precisely from the eviction of Palestinian families who were renting Jewish property in Jerusalem. There is a Jewish policy of scraping together land, sometimes by taking advantage of the Palestinians' economic need to sell and other times through constant pressure. Israel's recent declaration that it is a Jewish state only confirms the tendency to regard Israeli Arabs (20% of the population) as second-class citizens. One novelty of the conflicts of May 2021 was that they indicated the possibility of social conflict between Arabs and Jews within Israel it-

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self, and not simply between Israelis and the Arabs in PNA-dominated areas. If this tension should increase, it cannot be ruled out that Israel would close off the Arab-majority regions, especially those in the north, and assign them a status similar to that of the mixed-control areas under Israeli military control.

Despair grows since no one now talks about the two-state solution. What is worse, the Israeli left has been left with just a token representation in the Parliament. There is no longer any real opposition on this question. In fact, whenever there is a terrorist attack or missiles are launched from Gaza, security fears are heightened in Israel, and far-right parties are strengthened. The government's disproportionate response only reinforces this dynamic.

### **Paradoxes of the Religious Element of the Conflict**

It is interesting to note that in this conflict the religious element does not play the precise role one would expect. Palestinian nationalism is traditionally secular. While Hamas in Gaza belongs to what has been called "political Islamism," Saudi Arabia's fundamentalist Wahhabism has pacted with Israel. On the other hand, a large part of the Zionist movement is not particularly religious. It is true that many Orthodox settlers are driven by Jewish nationalism, but it is

also true that there are entire neighborhoods of ultra-Orthodox Jews who denounce the state of Israel as illegitimate because it was not founded by the definitive Messiah, as their religious hope demands. These Jews live so separated from contact with others that they would not feel uncomfortable in a classical Islamic regime that both protected and subjugated religious minorities.

### **The Utopia of a Single State of Equals**

Faced with this extremely bleak picture, some progressive voices among Jews and Muslims (a minority, to be sure) have abandoned the two-state project as unfeasible and are beginning to dream of a single state where Palestinians and Israelis are treated with strict equality. Perhaps it is just another utopia, a heavenly Israel that can never be made an earthly reality. In this context, Pope Francis this year made an important call to universal brotherhood in his encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (cf. nos. 25, 26), and in Iraq he urged all of us to look to heaven and see ourselves as descendants of Abraham. Meanwhile, Israel continues to gain territory, but at the cost of committing moral suicide.

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