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THE PITFALLS OF A U.S.-ISRAELI VISION OF A PALESTINE STATE

AZMI BISHARA

After situating the Palestine question in the context of U.S. global policy, this essay deconstructs the U.S.-Israeli conception of Palestinian statehood as an all-encompassing “package deal” solution replacing the final status issues of return, refugees, settlements, and borders. The Gaza disengagement, the author argues, is the first step in implementing this plan. With disengagement, Gaza becomes a strictly Palestinian problem, no longer an Israeli problem, and whatever negotiations may take place will henceforth be dominated by technical and procedural issues connected with the Strip. The whole point of this vision of statehood, according to the author, is to downgrade the Palestine problem to its “true dimensions.”

THE PALESTINIAN ISSUE CANNOT be separated from the global context, in this case an American hegemony in a unipolar world. Since the arrival of George W. Bush in the White House, and especially since the events of 9/11, American decision making has been dominated by the so-called “neoconservatives,” who urge the use of power to build an empire. This is a theme that has been dealt with to the point of saturation, so I don’t want to delve into it more than necessary, but a few words must be said about an aspect of the new American world view that I believe to be the most important one affecting Palestinians today: the confused and confusing idea that the war against terrorism, America’s “commitment” to exporting democracy, and the war on certain Arab regimes (meaning the attempts to topple them) are one and the same. Sorting out these elements is very important to understanding the things being done in the Middle East by the American administration and its allies.

THE WAR ON TERROR, REGIME CHANGE, AND THE EXPORT OF DEMOCRACY

The line being put forward by the U.S. administration is that the end of the cold war has allowed it to put its “commitment to democracy” at the center of its foreign policy. The bipolar equilibrium, which in fact resulted in regional stability, had previously tied its hands, causing it to define its position toward

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any regime according to whether it is “for us or against us” rather than according to whether it is or is not democratic. So the new world order has meant, among other things, that the U.S. was now able to begin its export of democracy—democracy having become, it would appear, a commodity requiring marketing campaigns, good public relations, and the search for appropriate export agents (who in their turn would like to be exclusive agents).

With the war on terror and preoccupation with the threat of terrorism, the democracy-for-export venture has become confused with the separate notion that dictatorial regimes produce terrorism. This makes it a matter of U.S. *national security* to impose democracy on dictatorial regimes in the Middle East. There is, of course, no evidence that dictatorships produce more terrorism than democracies: the fact that over the last decade there have been far more terrorist actions in democratic India than in China, where there have been practically none, is a case in point. However much one may prefer democracy, the level of terrorist incidents has not declined in countries where democratic reforms have been initiated.

It is now obvious that the Bush administration did not give much thought to the difficulties that might be encountered in the attempt to build democracies without democrats, without organized liberal democratic forces or without a large middle class committed to society as a whole and willing to throw itself into nation building. But in any case, the entire venture of exporting democracy to certain Middle Eastern states has turned out to be just a pretext to fill the argumentative void that followed the discovery of the U.S. administration’s lies concerning the war in Iraq. What is really at stake is the attempt to take down postcolonial regimes built on armies and military security apparatuses in order to build new (friendly) entities while stripping them of the Arab identity that once conferred on them legitimacy. For one aspect of American policy seems to be de-Arabization, the breaking down of identity into confessions or sects (and in so doing exacerbating sectarian conflicts) and confusing sectarian divisions with pluralism—that is, trying to sell the Middle East the idea that pluralism is actually *sectarian* pluralism, not *political* pluralism. (A good example is present day Iraq, where the word “Arab” almost never appears in American communiqués, having been almost entirely replaced by “Shiites” and “Sunnis.”) The face of this exported democracy is not the face of democracy—it is an imperial face. The horrific manifestations of the American “struggle against terrorism” and “struggle for democracy”—the use of phosphoric bombs in western Iraq, the expanded use of torture in Iraqi prisons and in secret American prisons beyond the reach of U.S. and international law—have made people in the Middle East extremely cynical about American claims to respect universal principles of justice and legality.

THE PALESTINE ISSUE: TWO OPPOSING VIEWS

In the eyes of the Arab people—Palestinians and non-Palestinians, democrats and nondemocrats—the Palestine issue is the Arab world’s open colonial

wound. It epitomizes both the subjugation and dismemberment of the Arab world by colonial interests and the hypocrisy of the West on such issues as international law, human rights, the right to self-determination, and so on. This is the Arab view.

For those who dominate American policy on the Middle East, however, the Palestine issue, like that of terrorism, is a product of the cold war and the bipolar system; Palestinian legitimate resistance to occupation since 1948 (not just 1967) is dismissed as terrorism and violence. The Palestinian issue is also seen as a product or indeed a creation of the Arab regimes; for these people, the refugee problem is the result not of Israel's ethnic cleansing but of the Arab states' going to war against the newly created state of Israel on 15 May 1948, after hundreds of thousands of Palestinians had already been driven out or fled. And if the Palestine question is seen as growing out of the Arab regimes, then it follows that if there is "regime change" in certain Arab states, or if the regimes are blackmailed or pushed or forced to submit to U.S. dictates—in other words, if the issue is removed from the hands of the Arab regimes that manipulate it for their own ends—then the Palestinian issue will be dismantled, moderated, toned down, or at least not as central as it used to be. It is in this context that the U.S. continues to try to get more and more Arab states to recognize Israel in the absence of a just solution to the Palestine question. The Palestine issue was certainly not entirely foreign to U.S. action in Iraq or to its pressures on Syria. This is how the current administration's policymakers think, and it is also, in my opinion, very much the way people like former Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and current prime minister Ariel Sharon think. The symbolic importance of Palestine as the last colonial issue in the world is very much underestimated by the neocons and their colleagues (if not mentors), the Israeli right.

The new focus on Palestinian statehood, as the term is understood in the road map, fits very much within this framework. A Palestinian state is now seen as *the* solution to the entire issue, superceding and erasing the "final status" issues of Oslo. There is no longer any talk about the need for justice or even fairness ("fairness" being a better word for relative justice) for the Palestinians by stopping the occupation, withdrawing to the 4 June 1967 borders, dismantling the colonial settlements project, or compensating the refugees for their long histories of dispossession and exile and diaspora. Under the new thinking, the refugee issue becomes one of statelessness: since the Palestinian refugees are a stateless people; the problem is *not* occupation, lack of self-determination, the proliferation of settlements, Jerusalem, dispossession, or refugees, but simply a problem of statelessness. By turning the Palestinian issue into one of statehood, Palestine has finally been cut down to its "proper size," so to speak. (It is worth mentioning that this is the same logic that drove Sharon to claim that there already was a Palestinian state, and it is called Jordan. More recently he became convinced of the need for a Palestinian state to help Israel separate itself from Gaza and the densely populated areas of the West Bank.)

THE IMPLICATIONS OF STATEHOOD

Let us examine the assumption that if you give the Palestinians a state, all the problems will be solved together in a package deal. It is very important to understand the implications of this assumption, because many friends and supporters of the Palestinians—and even some Palestinians—appear unwittingly to have fallen into the trap and are now focused on burning questions such as how the Palestinians can get their state, when it might be realized, what its economic prospects will be, what kind of governance it will have, and so on. It is as if the ultimate goal of the Palestinian struggle for the last hundred years has been to have a state.

It is important to remember that the goal of the Palestinians originally was not statehood at all, but liberation and justice. Indeed, at least up until the 1960s, “statehood” in the diverse geographical areas of the Arab world was not seen by most Arabs as something positive, but as a means of integrating the colonial project into the region: the creation of more and more Arab states in the first half of the twentieth century was not at all a genuine Arab democratic effort, but a colonial enterprise. The Arabs themselves wanted fewer, larger states—ideally one great Arab state, at least in the *masbriq*, as had been promised by the colonial powers during World War I. But of course, once the state system in the Arab world was consecrated and fully consolidated, the Palestinians, too, came to express their yearning for liberation in the form of self-determination and statehood. However, it must be stressed that their aspiration was for a state as an *expression* of justice, not for a state as an *alternative* to justice.

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Yet it was this last that became the policy of Bush and Sharon: a state *instead* of justice, a state instead of a solution, a state as a *dis*-solution of the Palestine question, as a way of dissolving it. Under the Oslo agreement, the Palestinian issue was put forward as being composed of four main elements: (a) refugees, which was the main Palestinian issue before 1967; (b) Jerusalem, which is both an issue of occupation and the symbolic national and religious issue; (c) borders, which represents the issue of sovereignty; and (d) settlements, which is, again, the issue of occupation and colonialism. These are the four main elements around which the Palestinian issue was conceptualized and presented at that time, the four being called the issues of “final status” that needed to be solved. The Oslo accord did not pretend to solve them; the claim was that it provided a transitional period of confidence and trust building that would prepare the ground for their solution.

Without doubt, there were many Israelis—and certainly Sharon was among them—who believed from the outset that these “final status” issues could never be solved. Israel could not ask the Palestinians to give up Jerusalem, their right of return, or their demand that Israel withdraw to the 4 June 1967 borders or dismantle the settlements. It could not demand these things of the

Palestinians, yet at the same time it was unwilling to yield on any of these points. The “autonomy” or “interim period” provided under Oslo was in fact a way out that allowed Israel to avoid facing this impasse. The “interim period” was an internal Israeli compromise between, on the one hand, Israel’s unwillingness to solve these four issues in a way that would be even minimally acceptable to the Palestinians and, on the other, its reluctance legally to annex the occupied territories and have to choose between being a binational state or an apartheid state. Israel’s endless delays in implementing the transitional issues and its insistence at Camp David of the impossible-to-accept “end-of-claims” clause are expressions of this Israeli dilemma. The outbreak of the second intifada was a manifestation of the impasse faced in the Oslo process.

When Sharon and Bush began advocating a Palestinian state, they were talking in the language of final status. In Oslo there is no mention of a Palestinian state, but only of the four final status issues. Of course, if those issues were solved—if Israel gave up East Jerusalem, withdrew to the 4 June 1967 borders, dismantled settlements, and recognized the right of return—the logical result would be a Palestinian state, a free Palestinian state. But the logic of Bush and Sharon is to give the Palestinians a Palestinian state *instead* of resolving the final status issues.

Almost certainly, the envisaged “state” would not be the “final status” but a “transitional” state with “provisional borders” that would not be finalized for twenty or thirty years. This is so Palestinians won’t have to sign away Jerusalem and give in to reduced borders, so that nobody will be called a traitor. But whatever the state’s format, the Bush-Sharon logic is that with a Palestinian state, the four final status issues will automatically dissolve or vanish, in one way or another. Take, for example, the issue of refugees. If a Palestinian “state” were created without recognition of the right of return, the refugees would be citizens of the Palestinian state, though living abroad. Instead of refugees, they would become expatriates. They would be guests, foreign nationals; their having Palestinian passports would solve the problem of citizenship in the host countries. In Lebanon, they would no longer be a demographic threat to the country’s confessional balance because they would have a nationality and a passport. Not being given the right of return, their own problem would remain as acute as before, but the problem of others would be solved with the magic words “statehood” and “passport.” Thus, the refugee issue will become one of expatriates—the Palestinians have their state and theoretically they can “go back” to their state if they like.

Even if there is a state only in Gaza and on a mere 40 percent of the West Bank (as Mr. Sharon wanted and as Mr. Bush agreed to, as I will explain later), the issues connected with occupation will magically disappear through a change of terminology: the replacement of the word “occupation” by the phrase “dispute between two states.” You will have a Palestinian state and you have Israel. Between them, instead of the issue of occupation, you will have a “territorial dispute.”

Do you know how many territorial disputes there are in the world, even between Arab countries? So the urgency, the sting, that the Palestinian national issue had as a colonial issue would be taken away. The Palestinian issue would be “cut down to its proper size,” as Israel sees it, to a trivial territorial dispute between two states that will have to be settled peacefully. States, as we all know, now have the monopoly over violence, and the Palestinian state will be asked to monopolize arms and will be made responsible for preventing any struggle against Israel. With the dispute now simply territorial, there will no more be a national liberation movement of resistance, and any armed struggle will have to be neutralized. Why? Because there is a Palestinian state now, so any resistance would be a challenge not to Israel but to the legitimacy of the Palestinian state. It will thus be the Palestinians’ problem, no longer Israel’s problem. So you see, it is all very interesting.

As for the settlements, how will Palestinian “statehood” affect them? The “unauthorized” settlements inside the enclaves that will make up the Palestinian state (called “illegal outposts” by some members of the international community, notwithstanding the fact that international law calls *all* Israeli settlements “illegal”) will probably be removed, along with some settlements that are deep inside the 40 percent of West Bank land “set aside” for the Palestinian state. However, the settlements located in the some 60 percent of the West Bank called “Area C” in Oslo accords will be expanded. What there will actually be is an apartheid system masquerading as “two states”—an expanded Israel that will now include large swaths of contiguous West Bank space, where privileged settlers, sovereigns who consider the land historically theirs, have the right to move about freely, and the fragmented cantons where the Palestinians are confined, which is called their “state.”

So far, of course, there has not been a Palestinian partner even for the face-saving “transitional state” that does not require a Palestinian signature on the dotted line giving up Jerusalem, finalizing borders as Israel maps them, or making the other concessions demanded of them. Arafat, certainly, was not a partner for this kind of state and would not have been, so he had to go—whether or not he passed from the scene naturally is not known, nor in all likelihood will it be known; certainly there will be no international investigation into his death.

Be that as it may, it was only after Arafat’s death that Sharon was ready to take the first step in the direction I’m describing, which is the disengagement from Gaza. People confuse the disengagement with genuine withdrawal from Gaza. What Sharon was actually saying was this: “Since I have no partners for this plan for Palestinian statehood in part of the land, I will unilaterally give up the headache called Gaza, and then I will continue unilaterally, according to the pace I set, in the West Bank. I will be able to design the shape of the final status with a free hand, because the whole world, instead of condemning Israel, as they usually do, will be busy praising us for withdrawing from Gaza.” And, it would appear, that is what has happened.

THE GAZA SOLUTION

Needless to say, Israel did not want Gaza anyway. Its settlement project there did not succeed. Israel wanted to withdraw from Gaza, but there was no Palestinian partner willing to take it as the Palestinian state substituting for everything else. So Israel disengaged unilaterally, which gave it an unprecedented free hand in the West Bank and in the settlements around Jerusalem. Almost overnight, Sharon went from being a *persona non grata*—including in certain circles in the United States and Europe—to being hailed as a man of peace.

There is another point of confusion about the Gaza disengagement that needs to be cleared up: Many people believe that the step Sharon took in Gaza was totally unilateral and that it was made without any *quid pro quo*. In fact, the opposite is true: the step was *not* unilateral; there *was* a *quid pro quo*. The Gaza pullout was the outcome of negotiations, though not between Israel and the Palestinians or between Israel and the Arab states, but between Israel and the United States. (Sharon refused to negotiate with the Palestinians and apparently concluded that since the Arab regimes are so dependent on and anxious to please America, it was enough to negotiate just with Washington.) In any case, what Sharon got in return for disengagement was Bush's guarantee—formalized in a letter at the same time the disengagement plan was announced in April 2004—that the United States would understand that Israel could not withdraw to the 1967 borders, that the settlements had permanently altered the demographic situation in Jerusalem, and that the refugees could not be granted the right of return. So, actually, Sharon got exactly what he wanted concerning the nature of the final status, and the state that he and Mr. Bush had in mind—and which seems to be the way it is increasingly being interpreted under the road map—makes no mention of Jerusalem, the right of return, an end of settlements, or withdrawal to the 1967 borders. This was Sharon's greatest achievement, and it can even be argued that it is more important than the 1917 Balfour Declaration.

This is the plan that is going forward now, and there is little reason to expect it to change in its broad outlines. Sharon got rid of the Gaza problem, and Gaza is now strictly a Palestinian problem. This does not mean that Gaza is a closed issue: on the contrary, all the negotiations in the future will be about Gaza because almost nothing is solved there. Israel simply pulled out. The only thing that has been solved, the only positive step, is the dismantling of settlements, which is irreversible. But all the rest—passages, crossing points, the export and import of commodities, movement of the population, airports, seaports, the border passage between Gaza and Egypt—have to be negotiated with Israel in the future.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the Americans now will have to intervene and weigh in on these technical and procedural issues, and we will be speaking about "final status in the Rafah area," or "solving the issue of the port," and so on. We will be kept busy negotiating about Gaza, while meaningful negotiations about everything else, including statehood, will be

conditioned on the Palestinian Authority's taking steps against the Palestinian resistance in order to prove that Palestinians are capable of having a state, even in tiny Gaza and the 40 percent of discontinuous West Bank land Israel is willing to concede. In other words, negotiations about the meaningful issues will be conditioned on Palestinian civil war.

So in reality, there is no political process in the global context today. There is no peace process, and I wonder about people who use these categories. Practically speaking, all that we have now are the colonial practices of Israel. This is what must be faced, and the way the world community is doing it is to use symmetrical language—the violence of both sides; the moderates on each side; the radicals in each camp; the political process; and so on. There is no way that one can even begin to understand the situation or deal with it meaningfully when using these categories.

What seems to be getting lost is the fact that the main issue is still occupation. The Palestinian forces need to be united in order to face this situation of occupation. They especially need to resist the all too obvious plan of pitting Palestinians against Palestinians. A Palestinian civil war or confrontation undoubtedly feeds into Israel's agenda and one can only wonder what the United States's intentions are for the region judging by its actions and policies with regard to Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon, not to even mention Iraq. The possibility of a civil war situation in the region is by no means far-fetched. In Palestine, the losers in any such conflict can only be all Palestinians.

For the United States, the Palestinian issue is a burden on its Middle East policies. It is recognized as a source of anti-Americanism both on the popular and political levels. Unfortunately, America's way of dealing with this reality is not to work toward a solution that guarantees some justice for the Palestinians, but to try to get rid of this burden by reducing the issue to its "true dimensions."