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No, don't take away Gaza's hope

The State of Israel's terrorism and Palestinian religious terrorism combine to kill the very idea of peace in the Middle East

A year ago, some of us wrote 'as Jews', signing an appeal in which we said that 'A perhaps irreversible step is about to be made. Ariel Sharon's symbolic provocation [in front of the Al-Aqsa Mosque], accentuating the confessional character of the clashes – to the detriment of their political content – will encourage the growing strength of extremist religious forces to the detriment of a democratic and secular Israel and Palestine. We are on the road to disaster'. A year ago, some of us wrote as 'French people of Arab origin or Arabs resident in France', signing an analogous appeal for Palestine in which we welcomed the French Jews' text, denounced the 'suicidal stubbornness of the Israeli government' and condemned 'any racist or confessional drift in the Middle East or in France, particularly the profanation of synagogues and attacks against Jewish schools'.

Others then joined these appeals, creating a collective in support of Palestinians' rights. Three months after the beginning of the Intifada, we collectively noted 'the tragic solitude of the Palestinians' and demanded 'the implementation of the UN's resolutions, an unconditional Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied since 1967, the dismantling of the settlements in the occupied territories, the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state, and the right of return for the refugees chased from their land since 1947'. We thus intended to say that the conflict in the Middle East is political and not racial or religious, and above all to demonstrate that Jewish and Zionist are not synonyms. These appeals have unfortunately lost none of their pertinence.

Today listening to the spokesmen of the Jewish community institutions, you would be led to believe that a 'wave of anti-Semitism without precedent since the 1930s' is spreading across France. We will, obviously enough, fight any anti-Semitic activity. But today's France is not a land of pogroms; in fact, it is when you look at the violence and humiliations daily suffered by youth of Arab origin that you might get the impression of a wave of racism breaking.

The need always to be vigilant against anti-Semitism must not end up as a pretext to obscure the tragedy that the Occupied Territories are today living through. It is the repetition of the idea that Judaism and the unconditional defence of Israeli policy are one and the same that leads people to believe the pyromaniac fire-fighters. And it is then, indeed, that political anti-Zionism risks degenerating into anti-Semitic racism. Israel's existence as a nation is an irreversible fact, and there is a national community with collective rights, its own language and culture. But what form should it take? Is it to be a secular state or a 'Jewish state'? That is the constitutive contradiction of Israel: in what sense is the State Jewish? Through ethnic genealogy? By reference to religion? The 'Jewish State' would thus be an ethno-theocratic state ruling through a blood right that is incompatible with the equality of all citizens living on the same soil. Imagine if the French state defined itself as an Aryan state or as a Christian state! And what would people say if the PLO charter demanded an Islamic Palestine instead of a secular and democratic one?

As soon as we pretend that the Israeli colonisation of the West Bank and Gaza is not happening, then we reduce the Intifada to the nightmarish awakening of an 'anti-Semitic hatred existing since time immemorial'. That is, when these settlements are evaporated, wiped away, forgotten – along with the dynamited houses, the thousand dead and the tens of thousands of wounded. If, as Sharon has been repeating since 9/11, 'Arafat is our Bin Laden', then 'extra-judicial liquidations' become state terrorism's ordinary modus operandi. Legitimate resistance to occupation is thus converted into a barbarism that must be eradicated, along the model of George W. Bush's 'war without end' against terrorism.

Dan Meridor, Israel's minister of strategic questions, worries 'If we go on like this, without borders, without partitions, without divisions, then in the long term we face a danger on the demographic plane', since if there was one day 'a 50 percent Arab population, then it would no longer be a Jewish State, but a binational one' (*Le Monde*, 1 September 2001). He deduced from this the need to 'implement a unilateral separation'! Unilateral?

Considering the imbrication of the populations, that would mean forced transfers and giving the Palestinians a smattering of enclaves administered by a rump state. To put it another way, Palestine would be an Indian reservation or a vast holding

camp, dotted with settlements and lacerated by so-called 'bypass' roads. Certain ministers in the Sharon government now openly speak of a massive population transfer. Such an expulsion would be the ultimate expression of the logic of the Jewish State and the dream of Eretz Israel.

For the interior minister Ouzi Landau, 'the Oslo accords are not the solution, they are the problem… We will never accept a Palestinian state, it would be a catastrophe' (*Le Monde*, 14 December 2001). His intention here was to wipe away the principle of mutual recognition, expressly acknowledging the Israeli effort to demolish the Palestinian Authority: 'I prefer a Hamas laid bare to a Palestinian Authority that masks its intentions. At least then things are clear… That would be a fight to the death between us and the Palestinians, since as long as the Palestinians have hope the terrorism will not end'. It is thus necessary to 'bring in another million Jews within ten years, and keep progressing'.

Such are the ulterior motives behind the campaign around the rise of anti-Semitism, which helps provide new candidates to populate the settlements! Indeed, it seeks to liquidate the Palestinian question as a specific national question, in favour of a war between two fundamentalisms: that of the Sharon government, pursuing its project of an Eretz Israel at no matter what cost; and that of the Islamic fundamentalists who refuse any kind of cohabitation with the Israeli people.

This pair agree insofar as they both reject any negotiated process. State terrorism and religious terrorism thus combine to kill the very idea of peace. So, Ouzi Landau announces, it is necessary to take away all hope from Gaza, Ramallah and Bethlehem! But to take away Gaza's hope is also to exasperate the Arab peoples, incensed at being on the receiving end of the imperial West's triumph.

We are shocked that so few voices have been raised in opposition to the war waged by the Sharon government, against its racist policy and against the stupefying arguments put forward by its interior minister. We are troubled when we see the Israeli leadership associate the fate of the Jews of Israel with the limitless war heralded by George W. Bush and with his imperial militarism.

We denounce this politics of fear not only because of our concern for justice for the Palestinian people, but also because of our concern for the future of the Jews of Israel themselves. The contradiction on which the 'Jewish State' is founded traps them in the 'death agony' from which Israel was born. What kind of future can there be for a people who escape this agony through a murderous escalation of hostilities? Although Israel was supposed to provide a safe home for Jews, it is today the place in the world where they are most in danger.

Perhaps it is already too late to stop this drive to disaster. Israel multiplies its 'facts on the ground' by encouraging the 'natural' expansion of the existing settlements (more than 200 settlements and 300,000 settlers already) and making preparations that would reduce any hypothetical Palestinian state to a carved-up territory left in tatters; into bantustans. The war logic heralded by Ouzi Landau is very much already in motion. It is leading two peoples – and not just one – to catastrophe.

Perhaps there is still time to avoid the worst, with the Israeli army's unconditional withdrawal from the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem, and through the dismantling of the settlements. It would not even mean reparations, but merely to accord the rights of the Palestinians that have been recognised by UN resolutions for thirty-four years; resolutions that Israel has deliberately ignored, thus setting itself against international law.

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Translated by David Broder