

United States—Israel—Palestine

In 2001, Hebrew University sociologist Baruch Kimmerling observed that “what we feared has come true.” Jews and Palestinians are “in a process of regression to superstitious tribalism. . . . War appears an unavoidable fate,” an “evil colonial” war.¹ After Israel’s invasion of Palestinian refugee camps in spring 2002, Kimmerling’s colleague Ze’ev Sternhell wrote that “in colonial Israel . . . human life is cheap.” The leadership is “no longer ashamed to speak of war when what they are really engaged in is colonial policing, which recalls the takeover by the white police of the poor neighborhoods of the blacks in South Africa during the apartheid era.”² Both stress the obvious: there is no symmetry between the “ethnonational groups” regressing to tribalism. The conflict is centered in territories that have been under harsh military occupation for thirty-five years. The conqueror is a major military power, acting with massive military, economic, and diplomatic support from the global superpower. Its subjects are alone and defenseless, many barely surviving in miserable camps, currently suffering even more brutal terror of a kind familiar in “evil colonial” wars and now carrying out terrible atrocities of their own in revenge.

The Oslo “peace process” changed the modalities of the occupation but not the basic concept. Shortly before joining the Ehud Barak government, historian Shlomo Ben-Ami wrote that “the Oslo agreements were founded on a neo-colonialist basis, on a life of dependence of one on the other forever.”³ He soon became an architect of the U.S.-Israel proposals at Camp David in

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summer 2000, which kept to this condition of dependence. These proposals were highly praised in U.S. commentary. The Palestinians and their evil leader were blamed for the failure of the talks and the subsequent violence. But that is outright “fraud,” as Kimmerling reported, along with all other serious commentators.⁴

True, the Clinton-Barak proposal advanced a few steps toward a Bantustan-style settlement. Just prior to Camp David, West Bank Palestinians were confined to more than two hundred scattered areas, and Clinton-Barak did propose an improvement: consolidation to three cantons, under Israeli control, virtually separated from one another and from the fourth enclave, a small area of East Jerusalem, the center of Palestinian life and of communications in the region. In the fifth canton, Gaza, the outcome was left unclear except that the population was also to remain virtually imprisoned. It is understandable that no maps or details of the proposals are to be found in the U.S. mainstream.

No one can seriously doubt that the U.S. role will continue to be decisive. It is therefore of crucial importance to understand what that role has been and how it is internally perceived. The version of the doves is presented by the editors of the *New York Times*, who praised the president’s “path-breaking speech” and the “emerging vision” he articulated. Its first element is “ending Palestinian terrorism,” immediately. Sometime later comes “freezing, then rolling back, Jewish settlements and negotiating new borders” to end the occupation and allow the establishment of a Palestinian state. If Palestinian terror ends, Israelis will be encouraged to “take the Arab League’s historic offer of full peace and recognition in exchange for an Israeli withdrawal more seriously.” But first Palestinian leaders must demonstrate that they are “legitimate diplomatic partners.”⁵

The real world has little resemblance to this self-serving portrayal—virtually copied from the 1980s, when the United States and Israel were desperately seeking to evade the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (PLO) offers of negotiation and political settlement while keeping to the demand that there will be no negotiations with the PLO, no “additional Palestinian state” (Jordan already being a Palestinian state), and “no change in the status of Judea, Samaria and Gaza other than in accordance with the basic guidelines of the [Israeli] Government.”⁶ All of this remained unpublished in the U.S. mainstream, as was regularly the case before, while commentary denounced the Palestinians for their single-minded commitment to terror, undermining the humanistic endeavors of the United States and its allies.

In the real world, the primary barrier to the “emerging vision” has been, and remains, unilateral U.S. rejectionism. There is little new in the “historic offer” of March 2002. It repeats the basic terms of a Security Council resolu-

tion of January 1976 backed by virtually the entire world, including the leading Arab states, the PLO, Europe, the Soviet bloc—in fact, everyone who mattered. It was opposed by Israel and vetoed by the United States, thereby vetoing it from history. The resolution called for a political settlement on the internationally recognized borders “with appropriate arrangements . . . to guarantee . . . the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of all states in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized borders”—in effect, a modification of UN Resolution 242 (as officially interpreted by the United States as well), amplified to include a Palestinian state. Similar initiatives from the Arab states, the PLO, and Europe have since been blocked by the United States and mostly suppressed or denied in public commentary.

Not surprising, the guiding principle of the occupation has been incessant and degrading humiliation, along with torture, terror, destruction of property, displacement and settlement, and takeover of basic resources, crucially water. That has, of course, required decisive U.S. support, extending through the Clinton-Barak years. “The Barak government is leaving Sharon’s government a surprising legacy,” the Israeli press reported as the transition took place, “the highest number of housing starts in the territories since the time when Ariel Sharon was Minister of Construction and Settlement in 1992 before the Oslo agreements.” The funding for these settlements is provided by the American taxpayer, deceived by fanciful tales of the “visions” and “magnanimity” of U.S. leaders, foiled by terrorists like Arafat who have forfeited “our trust,” and perhaps also by some Israeli extremists who are overreacting to their crimes.

How Arafat must act to regain our trust is explained succinctly by Edward Walker, the State Department official responsible for the region under Clinton. The devious Arafat must announce without ambiguity that “we put our future and fate in the hands of the U.S.,” which has led the campaign to undermine Palestinian rights for thirty years.⁷

More serious commentary recognized that the “historic offer” largely reiterated the Saudi Fahd Plan of 1981—undermined, it was regularly claimed, by Arab refusal to accept the existence of Israel. The facts are again quite different. The 1981 plan was undermined by an Israeli reaction that even its mainstream press condemned as “hysterical.” Shimon Peres warned that the Fahd plan “threatened Israel’s very existence.” President Haim Herzog charged that the “real author” of the Fahd plan was the PLO, and that it was even more extreme than the January 1976 Security Council resolution that was “prepared by” the PLO when he was Israel’s UN ambassador.⁸ These claims can hardly be true (though the PLO publicly backed both plans), but they are an indication of the desperate fear of a political settlement on

the part of Israeli doves, with the unremitting and decisive support of the United States.

The basic problem then, as now, traces back to Washington, which has persistently backed Israel's rejection of a political settlement in terms of the broad international consensus, reiterated in essentials in "the Arab League's historic offer."

Current modifications of U.S. rejectionism are tactical and so far minor. With plans for an attack on Iraq endangered, the United States permitted a UN resolution calling for Israeli withdrawal from the newly invaded territories "without delay"—meaning "as soon as possible," Secretary of State Colin Powell explained at once. Palestinian terror is to end "immediately," but far more extreme Israeli terror, going back thirty-five years, can take its time. Israel at once escalated its attack, leading Powell to say, "I'm pleased to hear that the prime minister says he is expediting his operations."⁹ There is much suspicion that Powell's arrival in Israel was delayed so that the operations could be "expedited" further.

The United States also allowed a UN resolution calling for a "vision" of a Palestinian state.¹⁰ This forthcoming gesture, which received much acclaim, does not rise to the level of South Africa forty years ago when the apartheid regime actually implemented its "vision" of black-run states that were at least as viable and legitimate as the neocolonial dependency that the United States and Israel have been planning for the occupied territories.

Meanwhile the United States continues to "enhance terror," to borrow President George W. Bush's words, by providing Israel with the means for terror and destruction, including a new shipment of the most advanced helicopters in the U.S. arsenal.¹¹

Washington's commitment to enhancing terror was illustrated again in December 2001, when it vetoed a Security Council resolution calling for implementation of the Mitchell Plan and dispatch of international monitors to oversee reduction of violence, the most effective means as generally recognized but opposed by Israel and regularly blocked by Washington.¹² The veto took place during a twenty-one-day period of "calm"—a period in which only one Israeli soldier was killed, along with twenty-one Palestinians including eleven children, and in which there were sixteen Israeli incursions into areas under Palestinian control.¹³ Ten days before the veto, the United States boycotted—and thus undermined—an international conference in Geneva that once again concluded that the Fourth Geneva Convention applies to the occupied territories, so that virtually everything the United States and Israel do there is a "grave breach"—a "war crime" in simple terms. The conference specifically declared the U.S.-funded Israeli settlements to be illegal and condemned the practice of "willful killing, torture, unlawful deportation, willful

depriving of the rights of fair and regular trial, extensive destruction and appropriation of property . . . carried out unlawfully and wantonly.”¹⁴ As a High Contracting Party, the United States is obligated by solemn treaty to prosecute those responsible for such crimes, including its own leadership. Accordingly, all of this passes in silence.

The United States has not officially withdrawn its recognition of the applicability of the Geneva Conventions to the occupied territories or its censure of Israeli violations as the “occupying power” (affirmed, for example, by George Bush I when he was UN ambassador). In October 2000, the Security Council reaffirmed the consensus on this matter, “call[ing] on Israel, the occupying power, to abide scrupulously by its legal obligations and responsibilities under the Fourth Geneva Convention.”¹⁵ The vote was 14–0. Clinton abstained, presumably not wanting to veto one of the core principles of international humanitarian law, particularly in light of the circumstances in which it was enacted: to criminalize formally the atrocities of the Nazis. All of this too was consigned quickly to the memory hole, another contribution to “enhancing terror.”

Until such matters are permitted to enter discussion and their implications are understood, it is meaningless to call for “U.S. engagement in the peace process,” and prospects for constructive action will remain grim.