



VIOLENCE IN JERUSALEM—ISRAEL'S OPTIONS

By Asher Susser



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After a fortnight of stabbings, deliberate run-overs and shootings of Jews by Arabs, mainly in Jerusalem and Hebron, the basic sense of physical security of Israelis has been seriously eroded. Whether this develops into a Third Intifada remains an open question. It might evolve into a sustained, organized mass involvement in protest against Israel, like the First Intifada (1987-91). Alternatively, as Hamas is already advocating, it might become more like the Second Intifada (2000-04), which was a protracted campaign of suicide bombings and other armed attacks, orchestrated by various Palestinian militant organizations like Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and others. It could become a combination of the above or just peter out, until the next eruption.

No matter how the current wave of violence evolves, it is abundantly clear that those who talk of variants of a one-state solution can now have a foretaste of what it would really look like. What awaits the "one-staters" is a mini civil war eventually degenerating into a bloodbath the likes of which we are presently witnessing in various multi-ethnic, or multi-sectarian countries of the Middle East, where peoples and sects are tearing each other to shreds in an inflammatory atmosphere charged with religious bigotry and extremism.

Israel must draw back from the dead end to which the religious and ultra-nationalist right has led the country, from the assassination of Rabin, the undoing of Oslo, and the relentless expansion of the settlement enterprise since Oslo, deliberately designed to make a two-state solution impossible.

The Palestinians are not innocent victims in this story. It takes two to tango and they have their share in the dissolution of the Oslo process. When more moderate governments were in power in Israel, the Palestinians, whether under Yasir Arafat or Mahmud Abbas, squandered real opportunities to arrive at some form of settlement, by taking positions that made genuine historical compromise on a two-state solution unattainable. Even when finally offered more than 90 percent of the West Bank, plus land swaps with Israel proper and the partition of Jerusalem by Prime Ministers Ehud Barak in 2000 and Ehud Olmert in 2007-8, the Palestinian leadership balked. The positions of the Palestinians on Temple Mount (denying any Jewish connection, historical or contemporary, whatsoever) and especially on refugee return to Israel still puts an agreement on end-of-conflict way out of reach.

This Palestinian failure to reach historical compromise and the rapid resort to violence, especially the campaign of indiscriminate suicide bombings in the early 2000s that killed over 1000 Israelis in the streets, malls, busses and restaurants in towns and cities throughout the country, played a key role in decimating the Israeli peace camp and undermining its credibility in the eyes of the Israeli public. The impasse, therefore, is not only the doing of Netanyahu and the Israeli right, as so many in the international community and the media would have us believe.

But in circumstances such as these, it is most unlikely that Israel and the Palestinians would be able to negotiate an agreeable end to their century-long conflict. A negotiated resolution has not been in the cards for well over a decade. Perhaps it never was. But, the status quo is also untenable. So what are Israel's options?

Since its foundation Israel has distinguished between two types of security: Basic Security and Current Security. Basic Security is concerned with the preservation of the very fundamentals of the Zionist enterprise, that is, the preservation of Israel as the democratic nation state of the Jewish people. Current Security is about the day-to-day maintenance of the personal safety and well-being of the Israeli people. At times Israel's needs of Current Security conflict with the country's requirements for its long-term Basic Security. Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza was justifiably seen as an asset in maintaining Israel's Current Security. However, this very same occupation has eroded Israel's Basic Security by undermining its Jewish and democratic character as well as its international legitimacy, and thus had an undeniably negative affect on Israel's long-term survivability.

Israel must make a choice between being the democratic nation state of the Jewish people, alongside a presumably unfriendly or even belligerent Palestinian state, and creating an oppressive one-state reality in which Israel gradually loses both its democratic and Jewish character and its international legitimacy as well. The violence of the last few weeks has shown yet again that Israel faces two models of conflict management with the Palestinians. The one is the West Bank-Jerusalem model of occupation and settlement which entails constant repression, provocation and counter-provocation, violence and counter-violence. The numerous attacks on Jews by Arabs and Israeli punitive measures and retaliation, are beginning to acquire the character of a civil war, crossing over the green line as well, into Israel proper, as the Arab citizens of Israel join in the protest, and the attacks too, in identification with their brethren in Jerusalem and the West Bank. The other is the model of Gaza where Israel seeks to disengage from the Palestinians and employ deterrence as an alternative to occupation. The Gaza model is obviously not flawless, mainly because deterrence is not everlasting and has to be replenished periodically.

The Gaza model mainly poses problems on the level of Current Security to Israel, even if on occasion it has more strategic dimensions, like the temporary closure of Israel's one and only international airport last summer, under the threat of rocket attacks. The Gaza challenge has various defensive and offensive solutions and it does not pose an existential threat. The West Bank-Jerusalem model, on the other hand, is a Basic Security problem. It offers no reasonable or realistic solutions and is an insufferable threat to Israel's long-term survivability, which all the rocketry from Gaza is not. Israel must choose between these two models. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon did so ten years ago, when he disengaged unilaterally from Gaza, and he was right.

Even though the Gaza model was clearly not about peacemaking Israel must similarly disengage, unilaterally if necessary, from the West Bank and Arab residential areas of Jerusalem. This should be done in a phased process, over a period of a few years, rolling back settlements first and the Israeli army only later, to maintain as much security as possible in the process of disengagement. Unilateral withdrawal is not about peace-making, but about creating a two-state dynamic and maintaining Israel's *raison d'être* as the legitimate, democratic nation state of the Jewish people. That in itself might not bring peace but it could provide a radical improvement to the current situation of utter hopelessness and it might offer an eventual possibility for some form of peaceful co-existence.

Even if it does not, it is still in Israel's own self-interest to disengage if it wishes to escape the one-state dynamic, which clearly has a trajectory that does not serve Israel's long-term well-being. The demographic balance is tilting against Israel in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea (Israel, the West Bank and Gaza), where the Jews are close to losing their majority. (Some dreamers on the right may believe that withdrawal from Gaza, which is just over one percent of historical Palestine, will satisfy someone somewhere). In the continuing conflict Israel loses automatically in the court of international public opinion, irrespective of the precise circumstances, because of the occupation of the West Bank and the accompanying settlement project.

Israelis rightly complain of a prejudicial double standard that applies to Israel as it does to no other country. But the complaints are not heard by anyone except the Israelis themselves. More than anything else it is the settlements that give Israel's critics all the ammunition they need. It doesn't matter if the settlements are new, old or otherwise, nor if they are legal or not. It is their very existence, augmented by settler violence against their Palestinian neighbors, from the uprooting of trees, the defacing or damaging of Muslim places of worship, to arson and murder, which all fly in the face of the logic of partition and co-existence that has had a destructively corrosive impact over the years on Israel's international legitimacy.

Historically, Israeli legitimacy has rested on two pillars. One was the recognition by the international community after the

Holocaust that the Jews, the downtrodden of the earth, deserved a state of their own in their historical homeland. The other was the acceptance by the Jews of partition and a two-state solution for Palestine, as proposed by the UN in 1947. Israel's international acceptance has been rooted from the day of its foundation in the acceptance of the principle of partition. The Jews deserved a state of their own, but so did the Palestinians. The passage of time has weakened the collective international memory of the Holocaust and the post-1967 occupation has distanced Israel from the principle of partition. Israel's legitimacy has withered commensurately.

Netanyahu likes to compare himself to Churchill and he aspires to outdo Ben Gurion as Israel's longest serving Prime Minister. But Netanyahu, unfortunately, is neither a Churchill nor a Ben Gurion. He is an exceptional orator like Churchill, but Churchill's true greatness was not in speechmaking but in his perception of reality and his ability to make momentous decisions accordingly. Netanyahu has a flawed assessment of reality and calculatingly avoids momentous decisions at every turn.

Ben Gurion strictly observed three policy principles: Keeping Israel a Jewish majority state (and he was therefore an instinctive and immediate opponent to the post-1967 occupation of the West Bank); preserving Israel's international legitimacy; and maintaining its firm relationship with the US. Netanyahu has undermined all three. Ben Gurion went down in history as the greatest of Israel's founding fathers. As opposed to Ben Gurion the nation-builder, whose brilliance was in seizing the moment to make timely, historical and courageous decisions, if Netanyahu does not change course he might one day be remembered as the man of indecision and inertia who failed to recognize or seize the moment and thus seriously endangered Israel's survivability as the legitimate nation state of the Jewish people.