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AMERICA'S LAST TABOO

THE EVENTS of the past weeks in Palestine have been a near-total triumph for Zionism in the United States. Political and public discourse has so definitively transformed Israel into the victim during the recent clashes that, even though over 200 Palestinian lives were lost and 6,000 casualties have been reported, there is unanimity that 'Palestinian violence' has disrupted the smooth and orderly flow of the 'peace process'. There is now a small litany of phrases that every editorial commentator either repeats verbatim or relies on as an unspoken assumption: these have been engraved in ears, minds and memories as a guide for the perplexed. I can recite most of them by heart: Barak offered more concessions at Camp David than any Israeli Prime Minister before him (90 per cent of the territories and partial sovereignty over East Jerusalem); Arafat was cowardly and lacked the necessary courage to accept Israeli offers to end the conflict; Palestinian violence has threatened the existence of Israel—all sorts of variations on this, including anti-semitism, suicidal rage to get on television, sacrificing children as martyrs; an ancient 'hatred' of the Jews burns in the West Bank and Gaza, where the PLO incites attacks against them by releasing terrorists and producing schoolbooks that deny Israel's existence.

The general picture is that Israel is so surrounded by rock-throwing barbarians that even the missiles, tanks and helicopter gunships used to 'defend' Israelis from them are warding off what is essentially an invasive force. Clinton's injunctions, dutifully parroted by Albright, that Palestinians must 'pull back', give us to understand that it is Palestinians who are encroaching on Israeli territory, not the other way round. In the US media, Zionization is so thorough that not a single map has been published or shown on television that would risk revealing to Americans the network of Israeli garrisons, settlements, routes and barricades which crisscross Gaza and the West Bank. Blotted out com-

pletely is the system of Areas A, B and C, which perpetuates military occupation of 40 per cent of Gaza and 60 per cent of the West Bank, in keeping with the Oslo 'accords'. The censorship of geography, in this most geographical of conflicts, creates an imaginative void—once deliberately fostered, but now more or less automatic—in which all images of the conflict are decontextualized. The result is not just the preposterous belief that a Palestinian attack on Israel is under way, but a dehumanization of Palestinians to the level of beasts virtually without sentience or motive. Little wonder, then, that the figures of dead and wounded regularly omit any mention of nationality—as if suffering were shared equally by the 'warring parties'. Nothing is said of house demolitions, land expropriations, illegal arrests, beatings and torture. Forgotten are the ethnic cleansing of 1948; the massacres of Qibya, Kafr Qassem, Sabra and Shatila; the defiance of UN resolutions and flouting of the Geneva Convention; the decades of military invigilation and discrimination against the Arab population within Israel. Ariel Sharon is at best 'provocative', by no stretch of the imagination a war criminal; Ehud Barak is always a statesman, never the assassin of Beirut and Tunis. Terrorism is invariably on the Palestinian, defence on the Israeli, side of the moral ledger.

Ever since September 28 there have been an average of anywhere between one and three opinion articles a day in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Boston Globe*. With the exception of perhaps three pieces written with sympathy for the Palestinians in the *Los Angeles Times*, and two—one by an Israeli lawyer, Allegra Pacheco; the other by a Jordanian liberal who favours Oslo—in the *New York Times*, every such article—including the regular columns of Thomas Friedman, William Safire, Charles Krauthammer et al.—has vociferously supported Israel and denounced Palestinian violence, Islamic fundamentalism and Arafat's backsliding from the 'peace process'. The authors of this relentless tide of propaganda have been former US military officers and diplomats, Israeli functionaries and apologists, regional experts and think-tank specialists, lobbyists and front men for Tel Aviv. The unspoken premise of this total blanketing of the mainstream press is that no Palestinian or Arab position on Israeli police terror, settler-colonialism, or military occupation is worth hearing from. In fine, American Zionism has made any serious public discussion of the past or future of Israel—by far the largest recipient ever of US foreign aid—a taboo. To call this quite literally

the last taboo in American public life would not be an exaggeration. Abortion, homosexuality, the death penalty, even the sacrosanct military budget can be discussed with some freedom. The extermination of native Americans can be admitted, the morality of Hiroshima attacked, the national flag publicly committed to the flames. But the systematic continuity of Israel's 52-year-old oppression and maltreatment of the Palestinians is virtually unmentionable, a narrative that has no permission to appear.

American fanatics

What explains this state of affairs? The answer lies in the power of Zionist organizations in American politics, whose role throughout the 'peace process' has never been sufficiently addressed—a neglect which is absolutely astonishing, given that the policy of the PLO has been in essence to throw our fate as a people into the lap of the United States, without any strategic awareness of how American policy is dominated by a small minority whose views about the Middle East are in some ways more extreme than those of Likud itself. A personal example can illustrate this contrast. Some time ago the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* sent over a leading columnist, Ari Shavit, to spend several days talking with me. A good summary of this long conversation appeared as a question-and-answer interview in the August 18 issue of the newspaper's supplement, basically uncut and uncensored. I expressed myself candidly, emphasizing the expulsions and killings of 1948, the right of the refugees to return, and the record of Israel as an occupying power since 1967. My views were presented just as I voiced them, without the slightest editorializing by Shavit, whose questions were always courteous and un-confrontational. A week later, *Ha'aretz* published a reply by Meron Benvenisti, ex-deputy Mayor of Jerusalem under Teddy Kollek. At a personal level, it was full of insults and slander against me and my family. But Benvenisti never denied that there was a Palestinian people, or that we were driven out in 1948. Certainly, he said, we conquered you—why should we feel guilty? I responded to Benvenisti a week later, reminding Israeli readers that Benvenisti was responsible for the destruction of Harit al Magharibah in 1967, in which several hundred Palestinians lost their homes to Israeli bulldozers, and probably knew about the killing of several of them. But I did not have to remind Benvenisti or the readers of *Ha'aretz* that, as a people, we existed and could at least urge our right of return. That was taken for granted.

What is not so widely realized is that neither interview nor exchange could have appeared in any American newspaper, let alone any Jewish-American journal; and if, *per impossibile*, there had been such an interview, the questions would have been crude hectoring of the sort: why have you been involved in terrorism? why will you not recognize Israel? why was the Mufti of Jerusalem a Nazi? and so on. Whereas a Zionist like Benvenisti, no matter how much he may detest me, would never deny that there exists a Palestinian people which was forced to leave in 1948, a typical American Zionist would maintain that no conquest took place or, as Joan Peters alleged in a now all but forgotten prize-winning book of 1984, *From Time Immemorial*, that there were no Palestinians with a life in Palestine before 1948. Every Israeli knows perfectly well that all of Israel was once Palestine, that—as Moshe Dayan said openly in 1976—every Israeli town or village once had an Arab name. American Zionist discourse is never capable of the same honesty. It must ceaselessly maunder about Israeli democracy making the desert bloom, completely avoiding the essential facts about 1948 which every Israeli knows in his or her bones. So removed from realities are American-Jewish supporters of Israel, so caught between ideological guilt—after all, what does it mean to be a Zionist, and not emigrate to Israel?—and sociological swagger—is this not the most successful community in US history: supplying Secretary of State, Defence, Treasury, and successive heads of the National Security Council in the Clinton Administration?—that what often emerges is a frightening cocktail of vicarious violence against Arabs, the result of having no sustained direct contact with them, unlike Israeli Jews.

For all too many American Zionists, Palestinians are not real beings, but demonized fantasies—fearsome embodiments of terrorism and anti-semitism. A former student of mine, a product of the finest education available in the United States, recently wrote me a letter to ask why, as a Palestinian, I let a Nazi like the Mufti of Jerusalem still determine my political agenda. ‘Before Haj Amin,’ he informed me, ‘Jerusalem wasn’t important to Arabs. Because he was so evil he made it an important issue for Arabs just in order to frustrate Zionist aspirations, which always held Jerusalem to be important’. This is not the logic of someone who has lived with or has any personal experience of Arabs. It is no accident that Zionism, nurtured in the United States, has generated the most fanatical aberrations of all in Israel itself. Not for nothing were Dr Baruch Goldstein, who murdered 29 Palestinians quietly praying in the

Hebron mosque, and Rabbi Meir Kahane, Americans. Far from being disavowed by their followers, both are revered to this day. Many of the most zealous far-right settlers in the West Bank or Gaza, clamouring that ‘the land of Israel’ is theirs, hating and ignoring the Palestinian inhabitants all around them, also come from the States. To see them strutting contemptuously through the streets of Hebron as if the Arab city were already theirs is a frightening sight.

Policy stranglehold

But the role of these immigrants is insignificant beside that of their sympathizers at home. There the American Israel Public Affairs Committee—AIPAC—has for years been the most powerful single lobby in Washington. Drawing on a well-organized, well-connected, highly visible and wealthy Jewish population, AIPAC inspires an awed fear and respect across the political spectrum. Who is going to stand up to this Moloch on behalf of the Palestinians, when they can offer nothing, and AIPAC can destroy a congressional career at the drop of a chequebook? In the past, one or two members of Congress did resist AIPAC openly, but the many political action committees controlled by AIPAC made sure they were never re-elected. The only Senator who once remotely tried to oppose AIPAC was James Abourezk of South Dakota, who resigned for his own reasons after a single term. Today, virtually the entire Senate can be marshalled in a matter of hours into signing a letter to the President on Israel’s behalf. No-one exemplifies the sway of AIPAC better than Hillary Clinton, outdoing even the most right-wing Zionists in fervour for Israel in her avid clawing for power in New York, where she went so far as to call for the transfer of the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and the grant of leniency for Jonathan Pollard, the Israeli spy serving a life sentence in the US.

If such is the material of the legislature, what can be expected of the executive? In a little noticed but revealing episode, the current US ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk was abruptly stripped of his security clearance by the State Department, supposedly for a lax use of his laptop which may have disclosed confidential information to ‘unauthorized persons’. For a time he was unable to enter or leave the State Department without an escort, and was forbidden to return to Israel, pending a full investigation.¹

¹ Indyk has now been fully reinstated.

It is not difficult to guess what happened. The originating scandal—naturally, never mentioned in the media—was Indyk’s appointment in the first place. On the very eve of Clinton’s inauguration in January 1993, it was announced that Indyk—an Australian national of Jewish origin, born in London—had been sworn in as an American citizen at the express command of the President-elect, overriding all normal procedures in an act of peremptory executive privilege, to allow him to be parachuted immediately into the National Security Council, with responsibility for the Middle East. What had Indyk been or done to merit such extraordinary favour? He had been head of the Institute for Near East Policy, a Washington think-tank that lobbies for Israel in tandem with AIPAC. Predictably enough, Dennis Ross—a State Department consultant who heads American superintendence of the ‘peace process’—is another former head of the same Institute.

What, then, of civil society? Here the consensus that Israel is a model democracy, forming the one oasis of Western modernity in the political desert of the Middle East, is virtually impregnable. Should there be any sign of its slipping, an array of Zionist organizations, whose role it is to police the public realm for infractions, steps in. Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, a respected American liberal cleric, once said that Zionism was the secular religion of the American Jewish community. Many Jewish organizations run hospitals, museums, research institutes for the good of the whole country. Alas, these noble public enterprises coexist with the meanest and most inhumane ones. To take a recent example, the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), a small but vociferous group of zealots, paid for an advertisement in the *New York Times* on September 10 which addressed Barak as if he was their employee, reminding him that 6 million American Jews outnumber 5 million Israelis, should he decide to negotiate over Jerusalem. The language of the advertisement was positively minatory, upbraiding Israel’s Prime Minister for contemplating actions anathema to American Jews. The ZOA feels it has the right to intervene in everybody’s business. Its adherents routinely write or telephone the President of my university to ask him to dismiss or censure me for something I have said, as if universities were like kindergartens and professors to be treated as underage delinquents. Last year they mounted a campaign to dismiss me from my elected post as President of the Modern Language Association, whose 30,000 members were lectured to by the ZOA as so many morons.

In similar vein, right-wing Jewish pundits like Norman Podhoretz, Charles Krauthammer and William Kristol—to mention only a few of the more strident propagandists—have not hesitated to express their displeasure at the prospect of any concessions, however faint or bogus, by Israel to the Palestinians. The tone of these self-appointed guardians of Zionism is a combination of brazen arrogance, moral sanctimony, and unctuous hypocrisy. Most sensible Israelis regard them with distaste. To describe their diatribes as curses from the Old Testament would be a slur on the prophets. But their relentless clamour, incessantly criminalizing support for Palestinian resistance against Israel, can rely on an ideological trump card in the United States. For a totalitarian Zionism, any criticism of Israel is proof of the rankest anti-semitism. If you do not refrain, you will be hounded as an anti-semite requiring the severest opprobrium. In the Orwellian logic of American Zionism, it is impermissible to speak of Jewish violence or Jewish terror when it comes to Israel, even though everything done by Israel is done in the name of the Jewish people, by and for a Jewish state. Of course, strictly speaking, this is a misnomer, since nearly a fifth of its population is not Jewish. These are the people the media call ‘Israeli Arabs’, as if they were another species from ‘the Palestinians’. What American reader or viewer would know they are the same people, divided only by decades of brutal Zionist policy, assigning apartheid to the former, occupation and expulsion to the latter?

Hapless pleas

The worst of this implacable machinery of consensus in America, however, is Arab blindness to it. When the PLO opted after the Gulf War to follow the example of Egypt and Jordan, and work as closely as possible with the American government, it made its decision (as had the two Arab states before it) on the basis of vast ignorance and quite extraordinarily mistaken assumptions. The essence of its calculation was expressed to me, shortly after 1967, by a senior Egyptian diplomat: we must surrender, and promise not to struggle any further—we will accept Israel and the determining role of the United States in our future. There is no doubt that continuing to fight as the Arabs had historically done would indeed have led to further defeat and disaster. But neither then nor today was it the case that the only alternative was to throw ourselves onto the mercy of America—saying, in effect, we will no longer resist you, let us join you, but please treat us well. The pathetic hope was that if Arabs

cried long enough, 'We are not your enemies', they would be welcomed as friends. They forgot the disparity of power that remained. From the viewpoint of the powerful, what difference does it make to your own strategy if an enfeebled adversary gives up and declares, 'I have nothing further to fight for, take me as your ally, just try to understand me a bit better and perhaps you will then be fairer?'

Such pleas are bound to fall on deaf ears in the American state. All peace arrangements undertaken in the illusion of an 'alliance' with the US can only confirm Zionist power. To submit supinely to American designs in the Middle East, as Arabs have done for almost a generation now, will bring neither peace and justice at home, nor equality abroad. Since the mid 1980s I have tried to impress on the PLO leadership, and every Palestinian or Arab I have met, that the quest for a protector in the White House is a complete chimera, since all recent presidents have been devoted to Zionist aims, and that the only way to change US policy is through a mass campaign on behalf of Palestinian human rights, outflanking the Zionist establishment and going straight to the American people. Uninformed and yet open to appeals for justice as they are, Americans are capable of reacting as they did to the ANC campaign against apartheid, which finally changed the balance of forces inside South Africa. James Zoghby, then an energetic human rights activist, was one of the originators of the idea. Then he threw in his lot with Arafat, the US government and the Democratic Party, and abandoned it totally.

But it was soon clear that the PLO would never adopt this course anyway. There were several reasons for that. A strategy of this kind requires sustained and dedicated political work. It has to be based on democratic grass-roots organization. It can only spring from a movement, not a personal initiative by this or that leader. Last but not least, it demands genuine knowledge of US society, rather than superficial pieties or clichés. The reality is that there exists, inside America, a vast body of opinion which is often bewildered by the lurid rhetoric of Zionism and which would be capable of turning against it, were a mass campaign mobilized in the US itself for Palestinian human, civil and political rights. The tragedy is that the Arabs here have been too weak, too divided, too unorganized and ignorant to mount such a movement. But unless American Zionism is taken on in its homelands, all attempts to parley with the United States or Israel will lead to the same dismal and discrediting outcome.

The Oslo accords could scarcely have shown this more starkly. The Wye and Camp David talks brought home the same truth once again. What has Barak's 'unprecedented generosity' consisted of? The promise of a very limited military withdrawal, made at Wye—from a mere 12 per cent of the occupied territories—has never been kept, and is now forgotten. Instead, the Western media extol Barak's munificent offer of '90 per cent' of the West Bank to the PLO, in exchange for its abandonment of the Palestinian refugees to their fate. The reality is that Israel has no intention of giving back Greater Jerusalem, which covers over 5 per cent of the choicest West Bank land; or Jewish settlements, which amount to another 15 per cent; not to speak of military roads or areas yet to be determined. The largesse of '90 per cent' refers to what is left after all this is deducted. As for the grand gesture of considering shared authority over Haram al Sharif, the breathtaking dishonesty of the matter is that all of West Jerusalem (principally Arab in 1948) has already been conceded by Arafat, plus most of a vastly expanded East Jerusalem.

The shameful charade of the 'peace process' has now, at any rate temporarily, broken down, amid the explosion of popular anger among Palestinians who were supposed to be grateful for it. The stones and slings of young men thoroughly tired of injustice and repression are now offering courageous resistance to a demeaning fate, meted out to them not just by Israeli soldiers, armed by the United States, but by a pact with Zionism designed to coop them up in reservations fit for animals, policed by Arafat's apparatus with US military and financial aid, and openly collaborating with Shin Bet and the CIA. The function of the Oslo accords is to cage Palestinians in a remnant of their own lands, like inmates in an asylum or prison. What is astonishing is not the popular revolt against this diktat, but that it could ever have been passed off as peace instead of the desolation that it has really been all along. A dithering Palestinian leadership, unable either to retire or to go forward, has been caught on the wrong foot. But the signs are that a new generation will not be content with the miserable, denigrated place accorded them in the Zionist scheme of things, and will go on rebelling until it is finally changed.