

Blinded by the Truth

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After three weeks of virtual war in the Israeli-occupied territories, Prime Minister Ehud Barak announced a new plan to determine the final status of the region. During these weeks, over 100 Palestinians were killed, including 30 children, often by “excessive use of lethal force in circumstances in which neither the lives of the security forces nor others were in imminent danger, resulting in unlawful killings,” Amnesty International concluded in a detailed report that was scarcely mentioned in the US. The ratio of Palestinian to Israeli dead was then about 15–1, reflecting the resources of force available.

Barak’s plan was not given in detail, but the outlines are familiar: they conform to the “final status map” presented by the US-Israel as the basis for the Camp David negotiations that collapsed in July. This plan, extending US-Israeli rejectionist proposals of earlier years, called for cantonisation of the territories that Israel had conquered in 1967, with mechanisms to ensure that usable land and resources (primarily water) remain largely in Israeli hands while the population is administered by a corrupt and brutal Palestinian Authority (PA), playing the role traditionally assigned to indigenous collaborators under the several varieties of imperial rule: the Black leadership of South Africa’s Bantustans, to mention only the most obvious analogue. In the West Bank, a northern canton is to include Nablus and other Palestinian cities, a central canton is based in Ramallah, and a southern canton in Bethlehem; Jericho is to remain isolated. Palestinians would be effectively cut off from Jerusalem, the centre of Palestinian life. Similar arrangements are likely in Gaza, with Israel keeping the southern coastal region and a small settlement at Netzarim (the site of many of the recent atrocities), which is hardly more than an excuse for a large military presence and roads splitting the Strip below Gaza City.

These proposals formalise the vast settlement and construction programmes that Israel has been conducting, thanks to munificent US aid, with increasing energy since the US was able to implement its version of the “peace process” after the Gulf War. The goal of the negotiations was to secure official PA adherence to this project. Two months after they collapsed, the current phase of violence began. Tensions, always high, were raised when the Barak government authorised a visit by Ariel Sharon with 1,000 police to the Muslim religious sites (Al-Aqsa) on a Thursday (28 September). Sharon is the very symbol of Israeli state terror and aggression, with a rich record of atrocities going back to 1953. Sharon’s announced purpose was to demonstrate “Jewish sovereignty” over the Al-Aqsa compound, but as the veteran correspondent Graham Usher points out, the “Al-Aqsa Intifada,” as Palestinians call it, was not initiated by Sharon’s visit; rather, by

the massive and intimidating police and military presence that Barak introduced the following day, the day of prayers. Predictably, that led to clashes as thousands of people streamed out of the mosque, leaving seven Palestinians dead and 200 wounded.

Whatever Barak's purpose, there could hardly have been a more efficient way to set the stage for the shocking atrocities of the following weeks. The same can be said about the failed negotiations, which focused on Jerusalem, a condition observed strictly by US commentary. Possibly Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling was exaggerating when he wrote that a solution to this problem "could have been reached in five minutes," but he is right to say that "by any diplomatic logic [it] should have been the easiest issue to solve (Ha'aretz, 4 October).

It is understandable that Clinton-Barak should want to suppress what they are doing in the occupied territories, which is far more important. Why did Arafat agree? Perhaps because he recognises that the leadership of the Arab states regard the Palestinians as a nuisance, and have little problem with the Bantustan-style settlement, but cannot overlook administration of the religious sites, fearing the reaction of their own populations. Nothing could be better calculated to set off a confrontation with religious overtones — the most ominous kind, as centuries of experience reveal. The primary innovation of Barak's new plan is that the US-Israeli demands are to be imposed by direct force instead of coercive diplomacy, and in a harsher form, to punish the victims who refused to concede politely. The outlines are in basic accord with policies established informally in 1968 (the Allon Plan), and variants that have been proposed since by both political groupings (the Sharon Plan, the Labour government plans, and others). It is important to recall that the policies have not only been proposed, but implemented, with the support of the US. That support has been decisive since 1971, when Washington abandoned the basic diplomatic framework that it had initiated (UN Security Council Resolution 242), then pursued its unilateral rejection of Palestinian rights in the years that followed, culminating in the "Oslo process."

Since all of this has been effectively vetoed from history in the US, it takes a little work to discover the essential facts. They are not controversial, only evaded. As noted, Barak's plan is a particularly harsh version of familiar US-Israeli rejectionism. It calls for terminating electricity, water, telecommunications, and other services that are doled out in meagre rations to the Palestinian population, who are now under virtual siege. It should be recalled that independent development was ruthlessly barred by the military regime from 1967, leaving the people in destitution and dependency, a process that has worsened considerably during the US-run "Oslo process." One reason is the "closures" regularly instituted, most brutally by the more dovish Labour-based governments. As discussed by another outstanding journalist, Amira Hass, this policy was initiated by the Rabin government "years before Hamas had planned suicide attacks, [and] has been perfected over the years, especially since the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority." An efficient mechanism of strangulation and control, closure has been accompanied by the importation of an essential commodity to replace the cheap and exploited Palestinian labour on which much of the economy relies: hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants from around the world, many of them victims of the "neoliberal reforms" of the recent years of "globalisation." Surviving in misery and without rights, they are regularly described as a virtual slave labour force in the Israeli press.

The current Barak proposal is to extend this programme, reducing still further the prospects even for mere survival for the Palestinians. A major barrier to the programme is the opposition of the Israeli business community, which relies on a captive Palestinian market for some \$2.5 billion in annual exports, and has "forged links with Palestinian security officials" and Arafat's

“economic adviser, enabling them to carve out monopolies with official PA consent” (Financial Times, 22 October; also New York Times, same day). They have also hoped to set up industrial zones in the territories, transferring pollution and exploiting a cheap labour force in maquiladora-style installations owned by Israeli enterprises and the Palestinian elite, who are enriching themselves in the time-honoured fashion. Barak’s new proposals appear to be more of a warning than a plan, though they are a natural extension of what has come before. Insofar as they are implemented, they would extend the project of “invisible transfer” that has been underway for many years, and that makes more sense than outright “ethnic cleansing” (as we call the process when carried out by official enemies). People compelled to abandon hope and offered no opportunities for meaningful existence will drift elsewhere, if they have any chance to do so.

The plans, which have roots in traditional goals of the Zionist movement from its origins (across the ideological spectrum), were articulated in internal discussion by Israeli government Arabists in 1948 while outright ethnic cleansing was underway: their expectation was that the refugees “would be crushed” and “die,” while “most of them would turn into human dust and the waste of society, and join the most impoverished classes in the Arab countries.” Current plans, whether imposed by coercive diplomacy or outright force, have similar goals. They are not unrealistic if they can rely on the world-dominant power and its intellectual classes. The current situation is described accurately by Amira Hass, in Israel’s most prestigious daily (Ha’aretz, 18 October). Seven years after the Declaration of Principles in September 1993 – which foretold this outcome for anyone who chose to see – “Israel has security and administrative control” of most of the West Bank and 20 per cent of the Gaza Strip. It has been able “to double the number of settlers in 10 years, to enlarge the settlements, to continue its discriminatory policy of cutting back water quotas for three million Palestinians, to prevent Palestinian development in most of the area of the West Bank, and to seal an entire nation into restricted areas, imprisoned in a network of bypass roads meant for Jews only. During these days of strict internal restriction of movement in the West Bank, one can see how carefully each road was planned: So that 200,000 Jews have freedom of movement, about three million Palestinians are locked into their Bantustans until they submit to Israeli demands. The blood bath that has been going on for three weeks is the natural outcome of seven years of lying and deception, just as the first Intifada was the natural outcome of direct Israeli occupation.”

The settlement and construction programmes continue, with US support, whoever may be in office. On 18 August, Ha’aretz noted that two governments – Rabin and Barak – had declared that settlement was “frozen,” in accord with the dovish image preferred in the US and by much of the Israeli left. They made use of the “freezing” to intensify settlement, including economic inducements for the secular population, automatic grants for ultra-religious settlers, and other devices, which can be carried out with little protest while “the lesser of two evils” happens to be making the decisions, a pattern hardly unfamiliar elsewhere. “There is freezing and there is reality,” the report observes caustically. The reality is that settlement in the occupied territories has grown over four times as fast as in Israeli population centres, continuing – perhaps accelerating – under Barak. Settlement brings with it large infrastructure projects designed to integrate much of the region within Israel, while leaving Palestinians isolated, apart from “Palestinian roads” that are travelled at one’s peril. Another journalist with an outstanding record, Danny Rubinstein, points out that “readers of the Palestinian papers get the impression (and rightly so) that activity in the settlements never stops. Israel is constantly building, expanding and reinforcing the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. Israel is always grabbing homes and lands in

areas beyond the 1967 lines — and of course, this is all at the expense of the Palestinians, in order to limit them, push them into a corner and then out. In other words, the goal is to eventually dispossess them of their homeland and their capital, Jerusalem” (Ha’aretz, 23 October).

Readers of the Israeli press, Rubinstein continues, are largely shielded from the unwelcome facts, though not entirely so. In the US, it is far more important for the population to be kept in ignorance, for obvious reasons: the economic and military programmes rely crucially on US support, which is domestically unpopular and would be far more so if its purposes were known. To illustrate, on 3 October, after a week of bitter fighting and killing, the defence correspondent of Ha’aretz reported “the largest purchase of military helicopters by the Israeli Air Force in a decade,” an agreement with the US to provide Israel with 35 Blackhawk military helicopters and spare parts at a cost of \$525 million, along with jet fuel, following the purchase shortly before of patrol aircraft and Apache attack helicopters. These are “the newest and most advanced multi-mission attack helicopters in the US inventory,” the Jerusalem Post adds. It would be unfair to say that those providing the gifts cannot discover the fact. In a database search, David Peterson found that they were reported in the Raleigh (North Carolina) press. The sale of military helicopters was condemned by Amnesty International (19 October), because these “US-supplied helicopters have been used to violate the human rights of Palestinians and Arab Israelis during the recent conflict in the region.” Surely that was anticipated, barring advanced cretinism.

Israel has been condemned internationally (the US abstaining) for “excessive use of force,” in a “disproportionate reaction” to Palestinian violence. That includes even rare condemnations by the International Committee of the Red Cross, specifically, for attacks on at least 18 Red Cross ambulances (NYT, 4 October). Israel’s response is that it is being unfairly singled out for criticism. The response is entirely accurate. Israel is employing official US doctrine, known here as “the Powell doctrine,” though it is of far more ancient vintage, tracing back centuries: Use massive force in response to any perceived threat. Official Israeli doctrine allows “the full use of weapons against anyone who endangers lives and especially at anyone who shoots at our forces or at Israelis” (Israeli military legal adviser Daniel Reisner, FT, 6 October). Full use of force by a modern army includes tanks, helicopter gunships, sharpshooters aiming at civilians (often children), etc. US weapons sales “do not carry a stipulation that the weapons can’t be used against civilians,” a Pentagon official said; he “acknowledged however that anti-tank missiles and attack helicopters are not traditionally considered tools for crowd control” — except by those powerful enough to get away with it, under the protective wings of the reigning superpower. “We cannot second-guess an Israeli commander who calls in a Cobra (helicopter) gunship because his troops are under attack,” another US official said (Deutsche Presse-Agentur, 3 October). Accordingly, such killing machines must be provided in an unceasing flow.

It is not surprising that a US client state should adopt standard US military doctrine, which has left a toll too awesome to record, including in very recent years. The US and Israel are, of course, not alone in adopting this doctrine, and it is sometimes even condemned: namely, when adopted by enemies targeted for destruction. A recent example is the response of Serbia when its territory (as the US insists it is) was attacked by Albanian-based guerrillas, killing Serb police and civilians and abducting civilians (including Albanians) with the openly-announced intent of eliciting a “disproportionate response” that would arouse Western indignation, then NATO military attack. Very rich documentation from US, NATO, and other Western sources is now available, most of it produced in an effort to justify the bombing. Assuming these sources to be credible, we find that the Serbian response — while doubtless “disproportionate” and criminal,

as alleged — does not compare with the standard resort to the same doctrine by the US and its clients, Israel included.

In the mainstream British press, we can at last read that “If Palestinians were black, Israel would now be a pariah state subject to economic sanctions led by the United States [which is not accurate, unfortunately]. Its development and settlement of the West Bank would be seen as a system of apartheid, in which the indigenous population was allowed to live in a tiny fraction of its own country, in self-administered ‘bantustans’, with ‘whites’ monopolising the supply of water and electricity. And just as the black population was allowed into South Africa’s white areas in disgracefully under-resourced townships, so Israel’s treatment of Israeli Arabs — flagrantly discriminating against them in housing and education spending — would be recognised as scandalous too” (Observer, Guardian, 15 October).

Such conclusions will come as no surprise to those whose vision has not been constrained by the doctrinal blinders imposed for many years. It remains a major task to remove them in the most important country. That is a prerequisite to any constructive reaction to the mounting chaos and destruction, terrible enough before our eyes, and with long-term implications that are not pleasant to contemplate.

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