

Van: Mouin Rabbani <mail@mouinrabbani.net>

Verzonden: dinsdag 6 februari 2024 19:48

Aan: Commissie BUZA <cie.buza@tweedekamer.nl>; Dekker, S.L. <s.l.dekker@tweedekamer.nl>

Onderwerp: Eerste van twee artikelen

U ontvangt niet vaak e-mail van mail@mouinrabbani.net. [Meer informatie over waarom dit belangrijk is](#)

<https://www.securityincontext.com/posts/gaza-apocalypse>

Gaza Apocalypse

Mouin Rabbani

/A reality in which Israel has gone too far, for too long, is ultimately responsible for the current crisis in the Middle East. Whereas the shock of the 1973 October War ultimately persuaded Israel to relinquish occupied Egyptian territory, it also set in motion dynamics that intensified Israel's determination to annex the Palestinian and Syrian territories it rules. In the aftermath of 7 October and Israel's genocidal onslaught on the Gaza Strip, Israeli rejectionism is likely to be matched by that of its adversaries./

Speaking to a group of Israeli military veterans in 1971, Moshe Dayan, Israel's Defence Minister and hero of its 1967 June War victory, triumphantly declared, "Better Sharm al-Shaikh without peace than peace without Sharm al-Shaikh". Two years later the Egyptian military crossed the Suez Canal. In the space of several hours, they demolished the purportedly impenetrable Bar-Lev Line Israel had erected on its east bank.

Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's objectives were to shatter Israel's conceit of military invincibility and compel Henry Kissinger to reconsider his dismissive response to Cairo's offers to conclude a separate peace with Israel. The shock of Egypt's 1973 October surprise produced an Israeli realization that its military superiority was no match for Egypt's determination to recover its occupied territories, and that Cairo would eventually impose on Israel a cost greater than it could bear. Before the decade was out, a deflated Dayan was the architect of an agreement—the groundwork of which had been laid by a chastened Kissinger—that gave Israel peace with Egypt, but without Sharm al-Shaikh.

The October War also set another dynamic in motion. Similarly empowered by post-1967 triumphalism, and after 1973 spurred into action by fears Israel would be compelled to embrace the "land for peace" formula to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, messianic Zionist movements such as Gush Emunim ("Bloc of the Faithful"), along with ultra-nationalist proponents of Greater Israel, launched a concerted campaign to expand and consolidate the Israeli presence in the occupied Arab territories.

Successive Israeli governments, determined to retain as much of the land conquered during the 1967 June War as possible, empowered and enabled such groups and effectively deployed them as the spearhead of their territorial agenda. The United States and the Europeans, despite their formal positions and periodic slaps on the expanding Israeli wrist at the United Nations, did literally nothing to dissuade Israel from this trajectory. In various ways, these countries played a vital role in making the settlement enterprise, and with it the process of creeping annexation, a viable proposition.

Israel's confidence that it could pursue this agenda without consequences from its allies, and the impunity enjoyed by its settler auxiliaries, is central to the inexorable march rightwards of Israeli state and society since 1973. When Palestinian self-determination entered the equation and Israeli-Palestinian relations eventually superseded the Arab-Israeli equation, the West, lagging behind the international community by several decades, eventually endorsed Palestinian statehood. Its refusal to confront Israel over the acceleration of its settlement enterprise or consolidation of "a regime [≤
≥](https://www.btselem.org/publications/fulltext/202101_this_is_apartheid) of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea" ensured that US-led and EU-financed diplomatic initiatives were stillborn. It was, in the words of Palestinian diplomat Afif Safieh, "all process and no peace". In no small part because, as former US diplomat Aaron David Miller retrospectively conceded, Washington functioned not as mediator, but as "Israel's lawyer."

After the 2000 Camp David summit clarified that a genuinely sovereign Palestinian state on twenty-two per cent of Mandatory Palestine was not on the US-Israeli agenda, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip once again erupted in rebellion, Israel dispensed with even the charade of Oslo's permanent status negotiations. With only the briefest of interludes, it reverted to unilateralism as its preferred approach. Henceforth, issues in dispute with the Palestinians would be resolved by it and it alone, through the application of naked force and power, on terms determined solely by Israel's strategic objectives. This was particularly evident in the Gaza Strip, where under Ariel Sharon Israel categorically refused to coordinate its 2005 "disengagement" with the Palestinian Authority. It did so in the full expectation that the territory would come to be dominated by Hamas, furthering Israel's goal of Palestinian fragmentation.

Once Hamas did seize power in 2007, this served as a pretext for tightening its punishing blockade—imposed in coordination with Egypt—and for periodic military campaigns (termed "mowing the lawn" by Israeli planners) to keep Gaza weak, isolated, and permanently off balance. As multiple crises enveloped the region in 2011-2012 the Palestinians all but disappeared from the regional and international agenda, reappearing if at all as window dressing for US-engineered Arab-Israeli normalisation agreements designed not to promote a resolution of the Question of Palestine, but to further marginalise the Palestinians and leave them permanently at Israel's mercy.

It is against this background that we should understand Hamas's determination on 7 October to irrevocably shatter the status quo. The timing of Hamas's attack remains somewhat of a mystery. That it came on the fiftieth anniversary, almost

to the day, of the joint Egyptian-Syrian offensive that set off the October 1973 War may be an explanation. Given that they were at least a year or two in the making, and would additionally have required extensive preparatory measures once the decision to launch them was taken, it seems reasonable to dismiss the notion that their planning was a response to the policies of Israel's current government or that they were undertaken on account of a specific incident.

A key turning point appears to have been the Unity Intifada of 2021, during which it was Hamas that for the first time since 2007 initiated an armed confrontation with Israel, and did so for reasons that had nothing to do with the Gaza Strip. Ultimately it changed nothing, which would have persuaded Hamas it needed to conduct a significantly more spectacular action. But it had also, albeit temporarily, successfully placed Palestine at the centre of the global agenda, unleashed widespread demonstrations throughout the region and beyond in support of the Palestinians, and provided a measure of relief to Palestinians in East Jerusalem threatened with imminent eviction.

The scope and scale of the 7 October attacks almost certainly exceeded their ambition, since Hamas is unlikely to have assumed the Israeli military would collapse like a house of cards, or that the intelligence services had failed to acquire and process relevant information about their plans and intentions. Although the Gaza Strip is arguably the most intensively surveilled territory on Earth, the element of surprise exceeded even that achieved by Egypt and Syria in October 1973. Israel's billion-dollar Iron Wall, a physical, electronic, and digital barrier, replete with sensors and automated machine guns, and designed to encage the Gaza Strip with fewer soldiers on duty, proved even more flimsy than the Bar-Lev Line.

While 7 October 2023 has entered the Western imagination as a pre-meditated atrocity whose sole objective was to kill Jews and kill as many as possible, the reality is somewhat more complex. Hamas well understood that, if it wanted to change the balance of power with Israel, it would need to demonstrate the capacity to inflict meaningful damage on Israel's military. Its primary objective was to inflict a severe blow on the Gaza Division, which as its name suggests is responsible for implementing Israeli policy towards the territory it occupies. Representing the tip of Israel's spear, it was on 7 October essentially wiped out as a coherent fighting force. Hundreds of soldiers and officers were killed in multiple bases, many more wounded, and dozens taken prisoner and spirited to prepared facilities in the Gaza Strip.

Separately, Palestinian units infiltrated and seized control of multiple population centers in the "Gaza envelope", an area larger than the Gaza Strip itself. In these locations, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other Palestinians also came into direct contact with civilians. Hundreds were killed, many more wounded, and perhaps a hundred taken to the Gaza Strip as hostages. According to figures released by Israel, the scale of civilian casualties in Israel was more than double that of the military ones.

As demonstrated most prominently during the second intifada, Hamas is not averse to targeting civilians, and claims that such attacks violate its moral code

can therefore be dispensed with. That unarmed civilians were killed, not only in situations of crossfire or by Israeli forces using the same tactics employed against Palestinians to reconquer Israeli towns, but deliberately by Hamas and other Palestinians in significant numbers, and in some cases massacred, appears indisputable. At the same time, the narrative of Palestinian Einsatzgruppen rampaging through southern Israel on a single-minded mission to spill Jewish blood also falls short. Hamas does not have a record of attacking Jewish targets that are not Israeli, nor one of attacking Jews – or Israelis – outside Israel/Palestine.

It should be noted that, as a matter of record, not only the Palestinian Authority but also Hamas have called upon the International Criminal Court to investigate all allegations of criminal activity. Israel, supported by the United States, rejects such investigations as a matter of principle. The Court's Prosecutor, Karim Khan, appears to have decided he has more pressing business.

The most lurid stories circulated in the aftermath of the attacks, many repeated to this day, have upon closer examination been exposed as fabrications or lack sufficient evidence. US President Joe Biden will probably go to his grave insisting he viewed images that don't exist of infants beheaded by Palestinians. Similarly, the only verifiable truth about accounts of babies roasted in ovens, necrophilia, mass/gang rapes, and the like is that they were concocted to dehumanise an enemy and, like similar war propaganda elsewhere, generate foreign and domestic support for what came next.

It was not only the unprecedented scale of casualties – over 1,000 killed and thousands wounded, and more than 250 held captive within Gaza – that marks 7 October as the most traumatic day in Israel's 75-year history. Equally important is that it represents the first time since 1949 that Israeli territory was seized by its enemies, and it had to wage war within its undeclared borders. It is a scenario Israel has for a decade been preparing to confront on its northern border with Lebanon, but never anticipated would emerge from the modestly-armed militia in the pauperised, blockaded, intensively surveilled Gaza Strip in the far south that it has controlled for over five decades. Israel's military doctrine that wars must be short, decisive, and fought on enemy territory did not survive the first day.

With Israel's war on the Gaza Strip, also launched on 7 October, now approaching its fourth month, a second pillar of Israel's doctrine has also fallen victim to reality. In view of the overwhelming power disparity between Israel and the Palestinians, the mere duration of this confrontation suggests Israel's military campaign is confronting significant challenges. While it has once again proven itself to be an effective killing machine, ground operations and urban combat do not appear to be among its strengths. Although armed to the teeth by the United States with its most advanced weaponry, an unlimited supply of munitions, and the brightest of green lights, it is increasingly clear that a decisive outcome is unlikely if not unattainable.

However, the destruction of Hamas's military infrastructure and ability to govern Gaza is only one of Israel's war objectives. The other is to inflict apocalyptic levels of death and destruction upon the Gaza Strip and its Palestinian

population. In part to satisfy its seemingly insatiable desire for revenge, in part because it believes a society destroyed will be deterred and deter others from contemplating anything similar, and in part to fulfil a longstanding policy objective. The latter, stretching back to the 1950s, identifies the large number of 1948 refugees in the Gaza Strip, who comprise some three-fourths of its population and often live within a short distance of their former homes – 75 years ago many made the journey to Gaza on foot – as a perennial threat to be resolved by their removal to more distant lands.

Over the decades, Israel has proposed and pursued numerous initiatives to reduce the Gaza Strip's Palestinian population, sending them to destinations as far afield as Paraguay. Turning the unconditional Western support provided on 7 October to further advantage, Israel immediately began advocating the wholesale, permanent expulsion of Gaza's population to Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. The proposal was enthusiastically embraced by the Biden administration and several European leaders, but faltered when it was categorically rejected by Washington's closest and most dependent Arab partners. Rather than reversing course, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken came out only against "forcible displacement." Voluntary resettlement is now a legitimate part of the policy debate.

Israel has been doing everything possible to ensure that "voluntary" ethnic self-cleansing remains the only remaining option for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Completing the work of the most intensive bombing campaign in history, military bulldozers and demolition crews have reduced large swathes of the territory entirely to rubble. Civilian infrastructure has been systematically targeted, with the health and education sectors effectively obliterated. Mediaeval siege tactics have produced the highest proportion of households in hunger crisis ever recorded globally, deprived more than two million civilians of access to potable water, and ended the supply of medication to the chronically ill.

Giora Eiland, retired general, former national security advisor, and advisor to the current cabinet, has been enthusiastically saying the quiet part out loud in his column for *Yedioth Ahronot*. Rejecting the concept of civilian non-combatants, and admonishing against a campaign focused on Palestinian military capabilities as too lengthy and costly, he consistently promotes calamity and cataclysm. On 29 October, for example, he urged Israel to inflict "not only destruction in Gaza City, but a humanitarian disaster and absolute governmental chaos ... [O]nly that outcome – the complete destruction of all systems in Gaza and desperate distress", will bring about victory. On 19 November he exhorted the government to reject foreign entreaties to allow food, water, and medical supplies into the Gaza Strip, emphasising that "severe epidemics in the southern Gaza Strip will bring victory closer and will reduce the number of IDF casualties." The identification of an entire society as a military target, and the determination to make it suffer on account of Israel's failure to defend itself, has been a common refrain among Israel's senior political and military leaders.

Israel has transformed the entire Gaza Strip into a killing field. In the space of less than three months it has, in addition to massacring over 25,000 people and wounding tens of thousands more, killed more UN staff and journalists than have

perished in any other conflict. UNICEF describes Gaza as the “world’s most dangerous place” to be a child, increasing numbers of whom are being killed in shellings aimed at hospitals, schools, and other locations assumed to provide zones of safety. In the words of Iraqi novelist and poet Sinan Antoon, “Only the dead are safe from Israeli bombing.” But not from its bulldozers, which have ploughed through cemeteries, ripping open graves and scattering about their contents.

South Africa’s case before the International Court of Justice accusing Israel of genocide may or may not succeed. That said, there are compelling reasons the Court has determined it deserves a proper hearing rather than dismissing it as a frivolous legal manoeuvre.

The scale and ferocity of the Palestinian attacks of 7 October and of Israel’s onslaught on the Gaza Strip every day since appears to have persuaded the West that it is finally time to respond to the Palestine question, or at least be perceived as doing so. With the US once again in the lead, Biden and Blinken lose no opportunity to confirm their commitment to a two-state settlement. Yet their words ring hollow to Palestinian ears, which hear only meaningless posturing. While a two-state settlement remains feasible <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/43313/Can-the-Question-of-Palestine-be-Resolved> as a practical matter, because it is ultimately about the deployment of sufficient political will rather than passing a specific threshold or “point of no return,” it cannot be achieved without an end to Israeli occupation. And more than half a century of experience has conclusively demonstrated that the West, and Washington in particular, is simply not prepared to adopt policies to bring this about. Even today, the Biden administration’s political horizon is a resumption of the Oslo process, which formally expired last century and pointedly refrained from identifying a Palestinian state as an objective. Rather, the illusory promise of such a state is the cosmetic façade for the Trump-Biden project of Arab-Israeli normalisation at the expense of Palestinian rights.

Were Moshe Dayan around today, he might be similarly chastened by the high price of Israeli hubris in its dealings with the Palestinians. But he would also remind us that a key reason Israel returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt was because doing so gave it a freer hand to tighten its grip over the remaining occupied Arab territories. If Dayan would nevertheless have concluded that it’s time for Israel to cut its losses, withdraw to the 5 June 1967 boundaries, and peacefully co-exist with the Palestinian people, those who succeeded him have a very different agenda and are today moving in exactly the opposite direction. Determined to make the maximalist aspirations of Gush Emunim and the ultra-nationalists a reality, they proceed as if Israeli impunity has been inscribed into international law and are determined to bring matters to an apocalyptic conclusion. Better Kiryat Arba without peace, than peace without Kiryat Arba.

The problem for Israel is that while its allies in the West may prefer a policy of vocal support or silent acquiescence regarding its policies, its actions have convinced a growing number of Palestinians and Arabs that, while peace with Israel may still be possible, it is no longer desirable. Co-existence with a genocidal, irrational state that consistently seeks to resolve political challenges

with overwhelming violence, and responds to failure with only more violence, is a proposition with diminishing currency in the region. The more so given that irrespective of what happens to the Gaza Strip, Israel's vulnerabilities have been irrevocably exposed by Hamas.

Tweede Artikel

Can the Question of Palestine be Resolved?

By : Mouin Rabbani

The insolubility of the Question of Palestine has a pedigree almost as long as the conflict itself. In its current manifestation this proposition focuses on the purported impossibility of achieving a two-state settlement through a termination of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories conquered in 1967 and implementation of a just resolution of the refugee question consistent with the international consensus on resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Death notices for this international consensus began to be posted almost as soon as it solidified in the wake of the 1973 October War. The concerted acceleration of Israeli settlement activity that began in the mid-1970s and picked up additional speed after Israel's Likud Party came to power in 1977 led to increasingly stark warnings that, left unchecked, Israeli expansionism would produce a "point of no return" beyond which it would be impossible to disentangle Israel from those it occupied. More recently, the failure of the Oslo process to produce a comprehensive peace has been presented as the final nail in the coffin of the planet's long-standing prescriptions.

As in previous eras, many of today's skeptics tend to be either invested in the status quo or averse to confronting it. Of greater interest in this respect are those who reach their conclusions independently on the basis of their interpretation of reality, or out of a conviction that present obstacles represent not just a crisis but also an opportunity to shift the paradigm, and improve or leapfrog an international consensus that continues to endorse a

two-state settlement towards one that adopts a democratic or binational one-state outcome.

The argument that Israel's occupation can no longer be reversed rests on a number of interrelated assumptions: that only the United States has the capacity to compel Israel to withdraw to the 1967 boundaries but is no longer willing or able to pursue this objective; that the centre of gravity of Israeli politics has shifted so decisively to the right that neither a government decision to end the occupation nor the survival of a government that resolves to do so remain realistic prospects; and that a comprehensive Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories is in any case no longer feasible on account of the level of opposition this would generate within Israeli institutions responsible for its implementation. That more than two decades of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations within the Oslo framework have been accompanied by a consolidation rather than reversal of Israeli control over the Palestinians and their land is typically deployed to clinch such arguments.

Those who claim the obsolescence of existing paradigms also point to the damage inflicted by time; the West Bank and Gaza Strip have now been occupied, and East Jerusalem annexed, for over half a century. This means that a clear majority of Israel's Jewish population has at least since childhood related to these territories as Israeli—indeed, as the heart and soul of the Jewish state—rather than as foreign and Arab lands. Furthermore, some ten percent of the Israeli Jewish electorate consists of settlers, with at least a comparable percentage of Israeli voters sharing the view that these territories must ultimately come under permanent Israeli sovereignty. It would under such circumstances be no more realistic to expect an Israeli decision to cede sovereign claims over the occupied territories than it would an American decision to return Texas to Mexico.

While each component of the case that the conflict can no longer be resolved on the basis of the international consensus has individual merit, and they collectively present a case that demands a substantive response, its most compelling element derives from realities on the ground. Between 1967 and the end of the 1980s, Israel pursued a systematic policy of enforced integration towards the occupied territories as a whole. Thereafter the framework shifted to separation, but primarily in order to consolidate control over East Jerusalem and other West Bank territory Israel aspired to eventually annex.

Jewish settlements, initially established to promote permanent Israeli rule over these territories, were subsequently multiplied and strategically located with the additional and explicit purpose of preventing a future Israeli government from enacting a withdrawal to the 1967 boundaries and

thwarting the prospects of a Palestinian state. More recently, and with apparent success, the main objective of continued settlement expansion has been to dictate the territorial disposition of the occupied territories in the context of Israeli-Palestinian “permanent status” negotiations. Much as the boundaries proposed by the 1947 United Nations partition plan reflected existing contours of Zionist settlement in Palestine, so Israel intends any future territorial demarcation to apportion West Bank sovereignty on the basis of its achievements in demographic engineering within this territory since 1967.

With each passing year, and particularly since the 1993 Oslo agreement, reality in the occupied territories more closely resembles that advocated by the 1967 Allon Plan, which identified those areas of the occupied territories Israel should strive to permanently incorporate and has since remained the operative blueprint for government policy. In 2020, this momentum was given additional impetus by the United States; Washington’s Peace to Prosperity initiative explicitly endorsed formal Israeli annexation of more than a third of the West Bank.

Points of No Return

More difficult is the task of identifying a “point of no return.” Those who today examine a map of the West Bank and throw their hands up in despair would from the vantage point of 2021 most likely view the realities of the early 1980s with considerable optimism, although even back then maps were mobilized to predict the imminent permanence of the occupation. Advocates of Palestinian strategic concessions “in order to save what can be saved”, and of ditching the two-state framework altogether because it is a fool’s errand, have been with us almost as long as the occupation itself. In Palestine, it has been “five minutes to midnight” for decades.

The more pertinent question regarding a “point of no return” is whether this is an essentially technical or political question. If it is a technical matter, it should be possible for analysts and decision-makers to reach consensus that there is a particular territorial or demographic reality beyond which mustering the political will to reverse it becomes superfluous. They might agree, for example, that once the settler population reaches half the total population of the West Bank and the Al-Aqsa Mosque is replaced by a Jewish temple, the 1967 boundaries will be rendered irrelevant, and the international community should therefore either recognize Israel’s *faits accomplis* or adopt an entirely different paradigm to resolve the Palestine question.

If, by contrast, the occupation and all it has produced are not more than obstacles to the application of the international consensus, then there is essentially no “point of no return” and the Israeli occupation can be

reversed and terminated irrespective of reality on the ground through the application of sufficient political will or a transformation of political calculations. The degree of Israeli entrenchment may of course enormously complicate such an endeavour and affect the extent to which various actors are prepared to expend political capital and resources to end the occupation. But unless the occupied territories go the way of the Americas in the centuries after 1492, their future—and that of the refugee question—will be resolved on the basis of political rather than technical considerations. There is certainly no denying that in the more than half century since 1967 the occupied territories have become a very different place, and Israel is in greater control of them than ever before, particularly if compared to the eve of the much-vaunted Middle East Peace Process. Indeed, it would be disingenuous to trivialize or seek to play down the sheer scope of either Israel's colonial project or the extent of its success. Yet when put in historical perspective, there is no intrinsic reason to compare it to the Americas or Australia rather than the more numerous and recent instances in which colonial projects that have been indisputably more successful than Israel's simply vanished.

Algeria, for example, was for more than a century an integral part of France and recognized as such; as late as the mid-1950s its colonial regime enjoyed levels of domestic and international support—not least in the shape of formal recognition—that Israeli leaders can only dream of. Within Algeria, the French had greater control of land and the economy than Israel has managed to achieve in the occupied territories, and significant areas of the country were dominated demographically by its *pieds-noirs* (France's settlers). To most reasonable people in 1954, the year the struggle against French domination was launched, the prospect of Algerian independence within a decade would have seemed preposterous. Yet this is exactly what happened, as the FLN successfully managed to make *Algérie française* a losing proposition and in doing so swing the international community decisively against its perpetuation.

Ireland, which in the scholarly literature has like Algeria been compared to Palestine, during the twentieth century managed to overcome no less than a near-millennium of British colonial encroachment and domination, initially through the 1916 Easter Rising and proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1919, then by means of the establishment of the Irish Free State and Republic of Ireland over most of the Emerald Isle in 1922 and 1937 respectively, and more recently when the Irish republican movement compelled the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to formally accept the proposition of a united Ireland in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

A particularly interesting case, not least because it is compared to Israel with increasing frequency, is that of South Africa (and Namibia). Initially colonized in the mid-seventeenth century, the apartheid regime was formally established in 1948, the same year as Israel. Although universally reviled outside the Reagan-Thatcher orbit by the 1980s, all appearances indicated that several centuries of colonialism culminating in decades of institutional segregation enforced by the most powerful security regime on the African continent had made it virtually impregnable to transformation. Crucially, this assessment was shared by many leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) and South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), who did not expect to see a rainbow nation in their lifetimes precisely because they appreciated the extent to which apartheid was successfully entrenched. Yet decades of struggle within and throughout southern Africa complemented by a global solidarity campaign that included not only the United Nations but also most of the world's governments (and in the case of Cuba direct military participation) ultimately paid off; the white minority regime agreed to relinquish Namibia (which had been physically incorporated into South Africa to a far greater degree than the West Bank into Israel), and Pretoria capitulated and sued for peace. A decade earlier, a similar process had transformed Rhodesia into Zimbabwe.

If, and despite the available evidence, one were to maintain that the European settler-colonial template does not apply to the occupied Palestinian territories, there is always the example of Eritrea, whose wholesale, formal integration by the Ethiopian state was recognized by both the Organisation of African Unity and United Nations until Eritrea successfully seceded as an independent republic during the early 1990s. The annexation of East Timor by Indonesia during the 1970s was by contrast not internationally recognized yet was in practice less contested than Israeli rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Until it wasn't and East Timor acquired independence in 2002.

Each of the above examples, and others that might be cited, of course differ from the case of Palestine in various and even fundamental respects. The point however is not to argue their historical similarity, but rather to demonstrate that in the absence of extreme scenarios like wholesale extermination of the colonized population, politics trumps facts on the ground virtually without exception. If there were indeed a "point of no return" in the entrenchment of colonial regimes, then Algeria, Ireland, and South Africa would have discovered and reached them long ago.

Misreading Oslo

One aspect that clearly distinguishes Palestine from these other cases is

that direct negotiations between the belligerents to end the conflict have failed to consummate decolonisation. More to the point, the Palestinians have since the 1991 Madrid Middle East Peace Conference negotiated for three decades, longer than the Algerians, Irish, South Africans, and for that matter the Vietnamese and a host of others combined. Not only has there been no political settlement, but its prospects have receded with, and on account of, every new round of talks. It should therefore come as no surprise that the purported failure of the Oslo process is routinely invoked to demonstrate the impossibility of achieving a two-state settlement and to pose broader questions about whether any political formula that does not result from decisive military victory can be found to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Question of Palestine in particular.

Upon closer examination, the bill of indictment against Oslo is singularly misdirected. Those who claim it has failed, and even more so those who believe that it was designed to achieve a two-state settlement and just resolution of the refugee question in accordance with the international consensus, have quite simply misread, misunderstood, and misinterpreted Oslo and the process it set in motion.

To be sure, Oslo reflected an Israeli conviction that the status quo had become untenable. Specifically, the 1987-1993 uprising in the occupied territories and Israel's inability to crush it exposed the illusion at the heart of its policy of enforced integration, while the extraordinary brutality deployed in its attempts to "restore the barrier of fear" put paid to its ability to continue marketing its rule as a "benign" or "liberal" occupation which Palestinians opposed only if coerced by pitiless militants. With its aspirations of a docile population of "hewers of wood and drawers of water" functioning as a reserve army of labour for the Israeli economy definitively and permanently shattered, the tenor of Israel's approach to the Palestinians shifted towards separation.

The transition to a policy of separation was reinforced by structural changes in the Israeli economy, including the collapse of the textile and other industries which relied upon cheap Palestinian labour; the large-scale importation of foreign workers to replace West Bank and Gaza Strip Palestinians in the agriculture and construction sectors; and the emergence of a high-tech service economy driven by highly-educated immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Internationally, the end of the Cold War and the political ramifications of the 1990-1991 Gulf Crisis amplified Israeli concerns that change might be imposed if it was not initiated by Israel itself.

The Oslo agreement was for all intents and purposes a blueprint for separation. Not of Israel from the occupied territories in a process of decolonisation, but rather of Israel from the areas of "dense Arab

settlement” (as the Allon Plan phrased it) and those lacking in resources. Thus, the 1993 Declaration of Principles (“Oslo I”) and 1995 Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip (“Oslo II”) pointedly omit any reference to “occupation”, “self-determination”, “statehood”, or even “1967 boundaries”, instead mandating the establishment of a “Palestinian Interim Self-Government Authority”, or Palestinian Authority (PA) for short. The latter would—from enclaves within rather than throughout the occupied territories—in turn ensure security for Israel and its settlements within a framework of continued occupation, and assume responsibility for the civil affairs of the Palestinian population. As for the core issues that collectively define the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, their consideration was postponed until “permanent status negotiations” to be convened within three years, but which were only initiated in 1999 and as of 2021 show no sign of ever being concluded. As if by design, the transitional has become permanent.

Critically, Oslo placed no explicit or meaningful restrictions on Israel’s ability to continue with settlement expansion and otherwise alter reality on the ground to its advantage. In 2021 Israel retains exclusive jurisdiction over all of East Jerusalem within its expanded municipal borders and over 60 percent of the remainder of the West Bank, as well as primary security jurisdiction over an additional 21 per cent (Area B). The PA by contrast exercises self-governing powers over only 18 percent of West Bank territory outside Jerusalem (Area A), and even this has since 2001-2002 been reduced to a fiction. In addition to severing the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem from each other, Israel has since Oslo effectively reduced the Gaza Strip to what former UK Prime Minister David Cameron already in 2010 characterised as a “prison camp”, emptied most of the Jordan Valley of its Palestinian inhabitants, and constructed a West Bank Wall that places some 10 per cent of that territory and the resources on and under it off limits to Palestinians.

Spurred primarily by the ideological fervour of successive Israeli governments, and the attendant massive infrastructural projects and profligate economic incentives, the rate of growth of the settler population since Oslo has—primarily on account of new arrivals rather than fecundity—significantly accelerated and far exceeded that of the total Israeli Jewish population. Between 1993 and 2021, the number of settlers in East Jerusalem more than doubled, while in the remainder of the West Bank it has more than quadrupled.

While the West Bank and Gaza Strip (including East Jerusalem) indisputably have remained occupied under international law, in the parallel universe introduced by Oslo they are merely “disputed” territories, in which any Israel claim is considered at least as valid as any continuous Palestinian presence, and in which—as advocated by numerous US

diplomatic initiatives—illegal possession constitutes nine-tenths of the law. Ireland's parliament, the Dáil, got it exactly right when it in May 2021 adopted a Sinn Féin resolution denouncing Israel's "de facto annexation" of territories it has not already sought to incorporate de jure. In Europe it is perhaps only in Ireland that a centre-right governing party, Fine Gael, would support such a motion and delegate its Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney, to explain its position thus: "The scale, pace, and strategic nature of Israel's actions on settlement expansion and the intent behind it have brought us to a point where we need to be honest about what is actually happening on the ground."

With respect to permanent status negotiations, Oslo I states only that "they will lead to the implementation of [United Nations] Security Council Resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973)". Appearances to the contrary, this is an entirely meaningless statement. Israel has consistently claimed that the interpretation of these resolutions by the international community, particularly concerning the obligation to withdraw from territory that is occupied, does not apply in full (and therefore has already been fulfilled in the context of the Egyptian-Israeli 1979 peace treaty pursuant to which Israel vacated most occupied Arab territory), and the Oslo agreement does nothing to correct this state of affairs. Not less importantly, Article XV of Oslo I on "Resolution of Disputes" requires Israeli consent to proceed to arbitration.

While Israeli policy since 1993 amounts to no less and little more than an uninterrupted and escalating violation of international law, it is by contrast rather difficult to identify Israeli conduct during this period that has been in direct and explicit contravention of its obligations under the Oslo agreements, and more importantly simply impossible to find instances where Oslo's American sponsor has held it to account for such conduct. Playing with a deck stacked entirely in its favour, and armed with a croupier publicly committed to dealing it only aces, there was never any doubt that Oslo would be implemented other than on the basis of Israel's strategic agenda, according to its interests and priorities, and within the confines of the obligations and limitations it imposed upon the Palestinians virtually at will.

It is certainly true that Oslo placed the Palestinians on probation and was designed as a test of the Palestinian leadership's ability to fulfil its commitments. But their reward for jumping through an unending series of Israeli-American hoops was never intended to exceed piecemeal expanded jurisdiction for the Palestinian Authority. It would, under the best of circumstances, result in a protectorate in the form of a statelet existing in permanent subordination to Israel, shorn of sovereignty, independence, and

the attributes of statehood in any meaningful sense of these terms. Decolonisation as conventionally understood was never on the agenda.

In addition to establishing a framework for separation with Palestinian consent, Oslo's other primary achievement was to transform the Question of Palestine from an international and regional to a bilateral matter, to be resolved on the basis of the primacy of Israeli interests and the vast disparity of power between the parties. Palestinian interests could and would of course also be accommodated, but only to the extent judged to be consistent with this overall framework. "Rights" granted could and have therefore also been subsequently revoked. Crucially, the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people as defined and repeatedly confirmed by the international community, first and foremost their right to national self-determination, no longer served as a core foundation for conflict resolution.

More to the point, under Oslo Palestinians have no rights and certainly none that can be exercised independently of Israel. Each and every Palestinian right (and Israeli obligation) recognized under international law, and for that matter all Palestinian entitlements under Oslo as well, require Israeli consent in the form of negotiated agreements or protocols in order to be exercised. In practice, Israel has through Oslo acquired veto power over the very definition of Palestinian rights. This is particularly evident in permanent status negotiations, where matters such as borders, refugees, Jerusalem and settlements are to be determined by mutual agreement, a fundamentally different concept than negotiating mutually satisfactory mechanisms to implement their longstanding definition by the international community. In practice the Oslo agreements gave Israel a veto on every aspect of the process, including the timeline and implementation of agreed commitments.

As the sole sponsor of the process, the United States has worked ceaselessly to subordinate the policies of other members of the international community to its own, and marginalize those that fail to embrace its agenda. This has been most conspicuous at the United Nations; during the 1990s the Clinton administration advocated that the world body repeal its entire corpus of resolutions on the conflict and forswear any further interest in the matter in order to support the implementation of Oslo. When this failed, Washington reverted to its time-honoured and well-honed technique of using its influence with other member states, and veto power at the Security Council, to perpetuate Israeli impunity and shield it from accountability for its actions.

Properly understood, it is difficult to sustain the claim that Oslo has been a failure, unless one genuinely believes that it offered an effective formula for

a political settlement leading to the implementation by 1999 of the international consensus as summarized in UNSC 242 and 338, annual General Assembly resolutions that specify the details of their application, and the relevant body of international law on the inadmissibility of acquiring territory by war and of population transfers to occupied territory. Failed treaties do not normally endure with the commitment and engagement of their signatories, sponsor and supporters for several decades. While certainly not a peace process in the conventional sense, Oslo can reasonably be judged as one of the most successful diplomatic agreements since 1945.

Rather than demonstrating that a two-state settlement and just resolution of the refugee question in line with the international consensus is impossible, Oslo fatally undermines the assumption this could ever have been achieved through bilateral negotiations conducted under the exclusive auspices of a state that is effectively a party to the conflict, within a framework that does not identify decolonization as an agreed objective and is otherwise devoid of a clear agenda. Like most diplomatic agreements, Oslo reflects and reinforces the prevailing balance of forces on the ground rather than challenges them.

It in this respect bears recalling that Oslo was concluded at a moment of Palestinian weakness and isolation with few parallels since 1948. With little in the way of leverage on account of the disintegrating (first) intifada, the siege of the camps in Lebanon, the expulsion of the Palestinian community from Kuwait, Arab weakness and division, ostracism by key Arab states that brought the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to the verge of bankruptcy, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Palestinians at Oslo effectively embarked upon a chronicle foretold. Unsurprisingly, the process the 1993 agreement spawned amplified rather than redressed the imbalance of power evident in its terms. Peace to Prosperity, the Trump administration's 2020 initiative advocating Israeli annexation and much else on Netanyahu's wish list, can in this respect legitimately be viewed as an effort to bring Oslo to its logical conclusion.

If we examine the history of decolonisation from India during the 1940s to East Timor at the beginning of this century, negotiations have never been held for the sole purpose of conducting talks to see if common ground can be identified between occupier and occupied. Rather, they have almost invariably been about reaching agreement on mechanisms to end occupation and resolve related issues because the colonial power has determined that sustaining its rule has become a losing proposition. (The notable exception in this regard, the Good Friday Agreement, drew significant inspiration from Oslo). In Oslo, however, Israel negotiated—all

too successfully—to consolidate rather than terminate its control over the Palestinian people and subordinate the international consensus to an Israeli-American one. It is this critical distinction that essentially invalidates the deployment of Oslo in arguments about the obsolescence of the international consensus.

Significantly in this respect, if we return to the debates surrounding Oslo at the time it was signed, its most prominent Palestinian critics, such as Edward W. Said, Haidar Abdel-Shafi, and Mahmoud Darwish did not condemn it because it would lead to a two-state settlement instead of a secular democratic state throughout historic Palestine. Rather, they rejected it precisely because they understood it would *prevent* a two-state settlement (which each of them at the time publicly supported) and do so with the complicity of the Palestinian leadership. Even those who by contrast had dedicated their lives to a one-state outcome, most prominently George Habash of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine as well as others like Shafiq Al-Hout, did not focus their condemnation of Oslo on its formal recognition of Israel and relinquishing of Palestinian claims to 78 per cent of historic Palestine. While remaining committed to the total liberation of Palestine, and thus opposed to any two-state settlement, their rejection of Oslo emphasized not that it would produce the latter, but rather that it would fail to end even the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and abandon the refugees to their fate.

Crisis and Opportunity

At virtually every level, the Palestinian struggle for self-determination has in recent years been beset with crisis and threatened with further catastrophe. The upheaval in the Arab world that erupted in Tunisia in December 2010 and quickly spread across the region was initially greeted with euphoria by most Palestinians and those who support them. Several years on, many of its initial enthusiasts have come to rue the day Mohammed Bouazzizi set himself aflame and set in motion the incineration of the Arab order instated in the wake of the Second World War.

Viewed from the vantage point of 2021 there is admittedly a case to be made that regional developments have not served the Palestinians well. With most Arab states preoccupied with internal crises and regional rivalries at levels unseen since the 1960s, the Arab political order is in no position to offer meaningful support to the Palestinians. In addition to this, the schism within the Palestinian political system has made individual Arab states more interested in supporting one faction against the other than the Palestinians against Israel, while at the same time drawing Palestinians into the internal politics of Arab states and regional coalitions in dangerous ways because

such involvement is generally motivated by the pursuit of factional advantage rather than any national interest.

Also at the regional level, the expansion of American control over Arab decision-making since the end of the Cold War and particularly after 2001, including the stationing of US military forces within and direct attacks upon a good number of them—most notably the invasion, occupation and destruction of Iraq—paired with hostility to Iran has led a growing number of Arab leaders to deal with Israel as a partner rather than adversary. The grandiosely entitled Abraham Accords brokered by the Trump administration sought not only to formalize these Arab-Israeli relationships, but leverage them to normalize Greater Israel and liquidate the Palestine question wholesale.

This is, parenthetically, in part the harvest of Oslo; one of its most egregious ramifications was the informal normalization of relations with numerous Arab states and particularly the effective renunciation, under massive American pressure, of the Arab boycott, which had applied not only to Israel but also third parties conducting business with it. While the expansion of largely covert Israeli-Arab trade has been substantial, the most significant consequence has been the removal of the threat of punitive sanctions against foreign corporations that do business with the Jewish state. These developments lie at the core of Israel's economic boom that commenced during the early 1990s, because it enabled its painless integration into the global economy. In doing so, it has deprived the Palestinians and Arabs of one of their main instruments of leverage in their dealings with Israel.

Within individual Arab states, the position of their respective Palestinian communities has also become significantly more precarious in recent years. This is most evident in Syria, even if its Palestinians are not being singled out for persecution as was previously the case in Kuwait and Iraq, and to a lesser extent in Egypt where incitement against Palestinians has become a permanent fixture of the media. The days when Palestine was the cause that united Arabs of all stripes and colours and helped define Arabism, and Arab leaders reflexively supported the Palestinians in word and often in deed and dollars as well out of either conviction or fear of public wrath, today appear only as a distant memory. Often forgotten by those calling for Israel's international isolation today is that until the late 1980s Israel was on account of Arab diplomacy, Third World solidarity and Soviet Cold War calculations in many respects a pariah state. Almost half a century before Human Rights Watch concluded that Israel is an apartheid state, it might be recalled, the international community acting through the UN General

Assembly condemned Zionism as “a form of racism and racial discrimination.”

In recent years many Palestinians had hoped Turkey’s emergence as a regional power, particularly after the deterioration of its relations with Israel, and the militancy of Iran would compensate at least partially for Arab weakness. Such optimism is however likely to prove exaggerated. Rather than lead the region and promote solutions to its conflicts, Turkey has increasingly become a participant in its disputes. Its relations with Israel, while unlikely to resume their former glory, nevertheless remain substantial. For its part Iran is currently preoccupied with resolving its differences with the West; even in the context of its regional rivalry with Israel, which has benefitted the Palestinians in various ways, enhanced support for their cause is unlikely to result from improved relations between Tehran and Washington. This would particularly be the case if the United States curtails Israel’s campaign of sabotage and assassinations in Iran.

The domestic Palestinian situation is no less alarming. For well over a decade, the Palestinian national movement has experienced an unprecedented political schism. Part symptom of the fragmentation and disintegration that has beset the Palestinian people and their institutions since Oslo, it has also exacerbated them in numerous ways. Where the Palestinians prior to Oslo unambiguously constituted a people in the political sense, unified and represented by cohesive national institutions broadly considered legitimate and in which differences were largely determined by political affiliation and ideology rather than geographical location—and primarily resolved within those institutions—today it would be more accurate to speak of disaggregated Palestinian communities that have but scant unity of purpose, are themselves increasingly fragmented, and lack any form of coherent institutional representation.

Amidst such calamity, can there be talk of opportunity? If one holds fast to the view that events unfold in linear fashion, the downward spiral is self-evident and likely to accelerate. Such a premise however flies in the face of not only logic but the weight of history, which reveals few if any linear progressions. A more sensible approach would be to identify and examine the various factors that obstruct and support the struggle for Palestinian self-determination, and on the basis of a comprehensive assessment propose a strategy that maximizes strengths, minimizes the influence of weaknesses, and is thereby capable of both responding to immediate needs and achieving core strategic objectives.

In the case of Palestine, there is despite the growing crisis, and in part on account of it, a compelling case to be made for opportunity. This is

particularly so if we compare the situation today to that in the immediate aftermath of the 1993 Oslo agreements.

To begin with, the international system has changed significantly during the past two decades. Oslo was signed and implemented in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union at a time when the United States reigned supreme, graduating from superpower to hyperpower in a unipolar world. In 2021 America's global hegemony is indisputably in decline. While it remains the most powerful state by a significant margin, we have seen the gradual emergence of other powers such as Russia and China onto the global stage, as well as the growing assertiveness of smaller states. The world no longer dances as readily to Washington's tune, while in the aftermath of costly American wars there is at least for the moment less appetite in the United States to compel others to do so. Unless one holds fast to the thoroughly discredited notion that the United States is an effective Middle East mediator, a more diffuse international system is an indisputably positive development.

Secondly, the international consensus on a just and durable resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has survived not only the Oslo process but also decades of unrelenting American-Israeli efforts to reconfigure it and consign it to irrelevance. There are numerous examples in this regard, particularly at the United Nations General Assembly, but especially noteworthy in this respect are the European Union's 2013 "Guidelines on the Eligibility of Israeli Entities Active in the Occupied Territories Regarding Grants, Awards and Financial Instruments Funded by the EU from 2014". In promulgating these rules, which prohibit any Israeli public or private entity active in occupied territory, including East Jerusalem, from benefitting from any EU privileges extended to Israel, Brussels and by extension each member state served Israel notice that despite more than four decades of occupation, the annexation of East Jerusalem, the transfer of more than half a million Jewish settlers to these territories, the best efforts of Israel and the United States to re-define key settlement regions as sovereign Israeli territory, and despite the record of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, the EU nevertheless considers the 1967 boundary sacrosanct, and in 2014 continues to define each and every Israeli measure to alter the status of any part of this territory illegal and illegitimate unless and until Palestinian consent is obtained.

The subsequent record is in the broader context of this discussion also particularly relevant. Initial screeching by Israel's politicians and advocates that Brussels was adopting policies reminiscent of Berlin during the previous century, and displays of bravado that Israel would in fact decide to boycott Europe, had the impact of a bee sting on a boulder. Subsequent

Israeli explanations that it was merely setting the stage for substantive negotiations to revise the Guidelines, and invitations to begin such discussions, were similarly ineffective and peremptorily ignored. Confronted with a moment of truth, the most right-wing, nationalistic government Israel had until that time ever known collectively capitulated and ate its serving of Brussels sprouts without complaint or protest. Observers and analysts who have spent careers indoctrinating the public that Israel is like an egg that hardens in hot water, and that pressure on it is therefore counter-productive and worse, abandoned their battle stations.

Subsequently the Obama administration, which spent eight long years obstructing each and every attempt to curtail Israeli impunity, in December 2016 declined to prevent the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2334, which once again confirmed that Israel's settlements, including those in East Jerusalem, have "no legal validity"; that the international community "will not recognize any changes to the 4 June 1967 lines, including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those agreed by the parties"; and required member states to "distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967". It is of course true that these principles have largely retained the status of ink on paper. Nevertheless, the significance of Israel's consistent failure to acquire international recognition for its annexationist policies is too often underappreciated. Particularly so if one considers that in contrast to the landmark 2004 International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on the West Bank Wall, the above resolutions were adopted by national governments rather than international jurists.

Similarly, the concerted efforts by the Trump administration to bully the international community into following Washington's lead on issues such as the status of Jerusalem and abolition of UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, were a resounding failure and succeeded only in setting new records of vulgarity in US Middle East diplomacy.

Third, Palestine today counts the most effective international solidarity network of any struggle for self-determination on the planet. This is all the more remarkable when one considers that this network all but collapsed during the 1990s on the supposition that Oslo had rendered it irrelevant, and has since its re-emergence at the beginning of the last decade been subjected to a sustained political, legal and at times physical campaign to undermine, delegitimize, demonize, and even criminalize it. Currently for example it has greater appeal on American college campuses and among European labour unions, and even among Jewish youth in the West, than either more high-profile causes endorsed and promoted by Western political elites such as Tibet and the Kurds, or similar protracted struggles for self-

determination such as those of Kashmir and Western Sahara. In recent years, the movement for justice in Palestine has even made greater inroads in that indispensable Western constituency without which any serious political engagement is inconceivable—the world of celebrity.

Fourth, there are today no remaining illusions about the capacity of the Oslo process to produce a just and lasting Israeli-Palestinian settlement. Indeed, most of its former proponents—and even many of its remaining champions—have come to the conclusion that it cannot (or even should not) produce any resolution at all. Not only does the emperor limp about stark naked, the inhibitions against expressing revulsion and ridicule at such unseemly displays of public nudity have all but disappeared. Simply stated, the opportunities for transcending or even administering it a *coup de grâce* have never been greater. It is not going to happen of its own accord, and will be an exceptionally difficult undertaking that may demand an exceptionally high cost. But one does not need to be a bloodhound to smell its blood, and armed with a purposeful strategy both the difficulty and price of consigning it to irrelevance can be very significantly reduced.

Fifth, American-Israeli tensions are clearly on the rise as Washington becomes increasingly frustrated with Israeli efforts to sabotage its Middle East policies, particularly but not exclusively with respect to Iran. At a deeper level, Netanyahu and Trump between them successfully vandalized the solid bipartisan consensus that for decades served as Israel's most important global strategic asset. Barring extreme developments, this is not going to rapidly lead to a fundamental US re-assessment of its strategic alliance with Israel or its commitments to Israel's regional superiority. But properly exploited, and especially if confronted with sufficient organized popular pressure, Washington may become increasingly reluctant to stick its neck out on behalf of Israel's most extreme policies, and might even find it in its interests to pressure Israel to desist from activities that isolate Washington internationally and delegitimise it and its allies within the region.

It is however within the Palestinian arena that change is most perceptible. The mass mobilisation of Palestinians throughout historic Palestine and across neighbouring Arab states during May 2021 demonstrated a unity of purpose and reclamation of agency without precedent during the Oslo period. Where Oslo previously divided Palestinians, its repudiation is today a matter of consensus and increasingly a popular demand. The response of regional and indeed global public opinion to Israel's latest assault on the Gaza Strip has furthermore demonstrated that the best efforts of Israel, its Western allies and regional partners to detach Palestine from its Arab environment and consign both it and the Arab-Israeli conflict to history have failed.

The prospects for a reconstruction of the national movement appear better today than at any point since it began to disintegrate in the early 1990s. Indeed, establishing a continuum between organized activity on the ground, a dynamic strategy, and credible leadership, is today seen by the vast majority of Palestinians as the critical priority, certainly when compared to negotiating with Israel or maintaining European and American funding for the Palestinian Authority.

Clearly, something is afoot within Palestine, the region and internationally that could lead to a fundamental reconfiguration of the manner in which the conflict is addressed and resolved. But taken together these factors represent only an opportunity. Left untouched, opportunity may well descend into catastrophe. Utilized properly, however, which is to say strategically, they can arrest and reverse Israel's impunity and Washington's critical role in shielding Israel from accountability in its dealings with the Palestinian people

The international consensus, particularly under present circumstances, provides the best available mechanism to leverage Palestinian strengths and overcome weaknesses, and can serve as the foundation on which to erect a sturdy and potentially successful strategy. Criticisms of this framework as one designed to secure Western and Israeli interests in the Middle East are only half right. It was initially developed at a time when the Question of Palestine had been relegated to a humanitarian appendage of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and as such emphasized peace between Israel and Arab states to the exclusion of the national rights of the dispossessed Palestinians. It was precisely on account of Palestinian and Arab success in the international arena that it was subsequently modified to incorporate Palestinian self-determination, albeit while leaving Israel's 1948 conquests intact.

Multiple Paths to Justice

What has not here been addressed is the position that a two-state settlement as set forth in the international consensus is, even if practicable, undesirable because it provides at best partial and incomplete justice for the Palestinian people. Advocates of this position point out that the occupied territories constitute a mere twenty-two per cent of historic Palestine, and that a resolution of the refugee question within this framework cannot resolve the contradiction between the Palestinian right of return and Israel's insistence on maintaining a Jewish majority within its sovereign borders. This approach essentially calls for the transformation of the land between the Mediterranean Sea and River Jordan into a binational or democratic polity.

The hard truth which remains unaccounted for by advocates of this position is that, much like the current one-state reality, a one-state outcome can only be achieved on the basis of armed force—in this case a decisive military defeat of Israel. The Israeli state will neither capitulate nor disintegrate in response to mass mobilisation as practiced during the US civil rights struggle, in South Africa, or recent Palestinian uprisings, no matter how much international support is generated. The classic Palestinian and Arab nationalist position that what was taken by force can only be recovered by force remains valid for agendas that advocate the dismantling of Zionism—what the leading Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem calls a regime of institutionalized Jewish supremacy—from the state and its institutions.

A credible military option is in this context one that not only deters and weakens but also overwhelms and vanquishes Israel. This is neither presently available nor within foreseeable reach, and more importantly cannot be replaced by non-military approaches. Nevertheless, many who advocate a one-state outcome decline to formulate or even embrace military strategies to achieve their objective, promoting instead the illusion that mass non-violent resistance and punishing international sanctions can create the necessary fissures in Israeli society and bring the state to its knees. Those who do recognize reality, like Hizballah in Lebanon, have developed impressive military capabilities but lack the capacity to march on Tel Aviv and rename Dizengoff Square. A credible military option is at least theoretically possible and for any number of reasons may emerge sooner than anticipated. Until that day, proposals to achieve the otherwise compelling vision of a wholesale, systematic political transformation of the territory between the Mediterranean Sea and River Jordan through popular and civil struggles appear doomed to at best incremental success.

A meaningful two-state settlement as envisioned by the international consensus rather than the Oslo framework, and thus one that entails a comprehensive Israeli withdrawal from all Arab territory occupied in 1967 and a just resolution of the refugee question, will also be extraordinarily difficult to achieve. But it can be achieved through a combination of sustained mass mobilisation, international political, economic, and judicial coercion, if and where necessary supplemented by armed force. While it remains inconceivable that the international community will act in Palestine as it did in Zimbabwe, if confronted with sufficient instability and threats to its interests it can be compelled to act as it did in Namibia and East Timor, and put to work to implement a resolution it has formally endorsed for decades.

The history of the Arab-Israeli conflict further confirms this observation. Israel's withdrawals from the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip in 1957, from

the Sinai Peninsula in 1982, from Lebanon in 1985 and 2000, and from the Gaza Strip in 2005 were achieved through a variety and often a combination of methods. To those who would respond—correctly—that Israel withdrew from Sinai in 1982 and Gaza in 2005 primarily in order to secure other objectives, not least among them the consolidation of its colonial enterprise in the West Bank, it bears recollection that despite its best efforts Israel received no *quid pro quo* from either the Eisenhower administration in 1957 or Hizballah in 2000.

The numerous parallels between the situation in Palestine and that of southern Africa during the era of white minority regimes notwithstanding, there are also fundamental differences that deserve recognition. In southern Africa the African population was dispossessed so that settler regimes could exploit not only its resources but also its labour. As far as the Boers and Brits were concerned, the larger the African workforce the better. In Palestine by contrast Zionism's strategic objective was from the outset the establishment of a polity with a Jewish demographic majority. When faced with the opportunity to determine the fate of Palestine's "reserve army of Arab labour" in 1948, Israel's leaders chose to expel and replace rather than exploit them. The white minority regime that ruled South Africa and Namibia was dismantled peacefully on account of a commitment that white capital would not be nationalized. Yet for Israel and the overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews economic calculations are secondary when contemplating future relations with the Palestinians.

Secondly, while the ANC's ideological commitment to *liberté, égalité, fraternité* was by all accounts genuine, it was also an easy choice to make for a liberation movement representing ninety percent of the population. Had European settlers represented as substantial a proportion of the South African population as Israel's Jews, it seems reasonable to surmise that the Pan-Africanist Congress and other nationalist movements would have obtained greater currency, while the South African Communist Party might have fared little better than its Palestinian comrades. Since at least the First World War, the vast majority of Palestinians and their leaders have consistently identified national self-determination or Palestine's integration into the Arab world as their primary objective. Rather than producing a Palestinian ANC, Israel's campaign to eradicate the PLO, and increasing reliance on religious zealotry to fulfil its territorial ambitions, instead gave rise to Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which have in recent years become serious competitors to the PLO precisely by fusing their religious ideology with nationalism.

One of the earliest and most prominent Palestinian advocates of a two-state settlement, Edward W. Said, during the final decade of his life became a leading proponent of a one-state solution. Said believed not only that Oslo had made Palestinian statehood impossible, but also that the alternative

political project he came to embrace would reinvigorate the national movement on an entirely different basis, and in doing so dispense with the leaders that had wilfully guided it into the Norwegian abyss. I had the opportunity to interview him about this topic in Jerusalem in 2001. Rather than forsake the struggle to end the occupation on account of a greater good, Said embraced its potentially transformative potential. In his view successfully removing Israel from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, not least by systematically dismantling the settlement project, would deal such a body blow to Zionist pretensions, and have such an impact on Israeli Jewish public opinion, that it could and in his view likely would open non-military pathways to the realisation of a one-state outcome. The logic of his position seems fundamentally sound.

While Palestinian advocates of a two-state settlement have generally insisted that its viability is dependent upon a simultaneous resolution of the refugee question, they have over the years become negligent with respect to the rights of Palestinians in Israel. Primarily in order to avoid the difficulty of negotiating Israeli sovereignty and the state's relationship with Israeli citizens, it also reflects their view that Palestinians in Israel have, particularly since being abandoned by Oslo, developed organisational structures of their own to address their rights and needs.

Fortuitously in this respect, recent reports by prominent Israeli and US human rights organisations concluding that Israel's relationship to its Palestinian citizens is defined by the systematic institutionalization of Jewish supremacy, and even more so the events of May 2020, have placed the rights of this community more prominently on the international agenda than at any point since 1948. It has also to a degree legitimized the incorporation of their plight into any resolution of the Question of Palestine. This could potentially open the way to a formula akin to that adopted in the Good Friday Agreement on the question of Irish unification. Agreed by London and viewed abroad as an empty British gesture to placate republican delusions about the proper disposition of the Six Counties, two decades later a referendum resulting in Irish unification is, like Scottish independence, seen as an increasingly serious prospect. Given the connections between Oslo and Good Friday, a similar formula incorporated into a two-state settlement would be poetic justice indeed.

In 2021 the debate over whether the Palestine question should be resolved in the context of one or two states continues to resemble the agony of a condemned prisoner spending the night before his execution unable to decide whether to spend the following summer in the French or Italian riviera. For such a debate to become meaningful Palestinians will first need to properly unify their ranks, properly mobilize their supporters around the

globe, find ways to reduce the gross imbalance of power between them and Israel, and begin the process of holding Israel accountable for actions it currently conducts with impunity, and raise their cost beyond what a critical mass of Israelis and their apologists are prepared to bear.

If and when that day does come, dismissing the two-state settlement because it is insufficient, and even more so because it has purportedly been tried and failed and been overtaken by reality, would deprive the Palestinian national movement of a strategic option that may well be its most viable path to not only self-determination but also justice. Palestinians may ultimately decline this option and do so for entirely sound reasons. But to eliminate it from consideration on spurious grounds would be a significant strategic error.f

ENDS