

Talk To 'Le Circle', London 19th June

(The Withering Away of Zionism)

Early Zionists set out to establish a Jewish State in what –they convinced themselves and others- was a land without its own people, a land bereft of a history except of that about themselves. Ever since its creation, however, Israel has had to struggle –militarily but also through its propaganda machine- in order to find ways to suppress the facts in order to keep that fiction alive. Forced expulsion of native populations during the skirmishes leading up to the '49 UN ceasefire agreement was one method to erase facts. Only around 300.000 Palestinians were left under the control of the new State, the rest from that coastal region having been driven out in the

climate of fear and violence beyond the State's new borders. Over the years, classifying the remaining population by any name –Christian, Druze, Beduin, Arab, Muslim, Baha'i- rather than that of their real national identity as a Palestinian people, was another way to suppress the fact that the land had a throbbing indigenous population with a history and a culture of its own. Replacing Arab names by biblical or Hebrew ones –whether historically justified or not- was a third. Demolition of entire villages –almost three hundred of them, was a fourth. The list continues. Almost twenty years after its creation, and following yet another of its resounding military successes in June 1967, conflict once again began to arise between the Zionist narrative and facts on the ground. On the one hand, Israel was able to seize even more coveted territory in

fulfillment of the Zionist dream; but on the other hand, not only would the Palestinian devil in the dream not go away: it would instead grow even stronger by the day. Paradoxically, one unintended consequence of Israel's 1967 victory and the breakdown of the borders was to bring back together under one roof three Palestinian population groups who had since Israel's creation been living under three different political regimes. Rediscovering and networking with each other only led to the reinforcement of a political identity Israel had hoped it had already suppressed beyond recovery.

Israel followed its military success by yet another, this time of a grand colonization policy that it proceeded to implement slowly but surely. Its success in this venture eventually resulted in its plantation

of over half a million Israeli settlers spread across the newly conquered territory, divided almost in half between the Jerusalem area and the rest of what used to be called ‘the West Bank’ –meaning, of the river Jordan, as well as of the country, Jordan. This area, comprising just over 6000 square kilometers, is now and as a result correspondingly subdivided into smaller regions, some going by their new/old Hebrew names, housing the newly-built clusters of settlements Israel built; and the rest containing Palestinian populated and unpopulated regions – Beduin encampments, hamlets, villages, towns, and cities, each classified by its own special name –Areas A, B, C, H1, H2, each subject to different rules prescribing what territories Palestinians can control and how much control they can exercise in it, as well

as what territories they have no control over whatsoever (more than 70%).

Significantly, this archipelago of Jewish and Arab islands dotted throughout the West Bank is a small replica -and remains the defining feature- of the territory once we zoom out to take in the larger picture of the country as a whole, where the same distribution pattern can be found to have taken shape over the past sixty years- essentially Jewish and Arab areas with the former defining the overall infrastructural grid of the territory and the latter situated on that grid's secondary extensions. In other words, a close inspection will reveal that the colonization pattern that had been spreading over the past forty years in the West Bank is nothing really but an extension of what had already taken place in pre-67 Israel: population colonies with

their distinct architectural styles being propped up around the country, the country's main highways primarily linking these Jewish colonies with one another, but therefore also serving to link the off-grid Arab areas with each another.

This overall dual urban pattern that has been developing over the years –arguably reflecting the success of the colonization policy, and the gradual erosion of the feasibility of separation or partition of territory - has however been countered on the other side by an equally significant demographic pattern –that of the decreasing percentage of the Jewish population in the overall territory. Just over 12 million people now live in the country controlled by the Israeli Government, divided between Jewish and non-Jewish, or Arab populations, with a slight edge still for the

former. The Palestinian population left in Israel after '49 had grown in size from 300,000 to reach around 1.3 million, while that in Gaza has now reached –according to an announcement made only yesterday– around 1.8 million, and that in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) around 2.7 million. On the whole, these are probably conservative estimates. Israel's Jewish population, just over 6 million, thus already shares the country almost equally with its fast-increasing Arab population –not quite the dream of the early Zionists. Moreover, what with these figures, the continuing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, and the continuing high-visibility failures of peace attempts, long by now has gone that old Israeli fiction of a country whose only history was that of the Jewish kingdoms which arose at two points in the ancient past, and which has otherwise been

lifeless, waiting for the once-again ingathering of a people without a land in the 20th century. The Jewish narrative no longer monopolizes informed international public opinion. Over the years, despite or perhaps because of their failures, Palestinians have managed to articulate a credible voice for themselves, as an equal claimant at least for rights in this country.

Paradoxically therefore, Israel's resounding military and colonization successes in bringing historical Palestine under its control with the aim of building a Jewish democratic State has in effect met with dismal failure: its successes only breathed life into its nemesis. A former head of the Israeli security services, Ami Ayalon, with whom I joined forces at one stage to try to drum up grass-roots support for a two-state solution back in 2000, used

to put it like this to his compatriots: Israel has won all its major battles; but it has yet to win the real war. He was scared for Israel's future, its gradual sinking into a situation where it would no longer be possible to disentangle a Jewish State from its Arab inhabitants. The 'real' war Israel had to win, he thought, was the actualization of the Zionist dream. In that dream, Arabs would hardly figure. Certainly, they would not exist in large figures inside the Jewish State. I might amend the Admiral's statement by saying Israel, by now, and barring a totally unforeseen event, has already lost that war.

Ayalon's sense of foreboding was not confined to him personally: far from it. Some of you may have seen that film 'The Gatekeepers' which came out last year in which Ayalon with other former chiefs of

Israel's internal security were interviewed about their assessments of the nation's political condition. Without exception, including that of the oldest and most infamous among them, Avraham Shalom, who passed away only two days ago, all those interviewed expressed their concern that the Zionist project was in danger, and that Israeli political leaders must be awakened to the fact before it is too late. These, let us remember, are the very individuals who were charged with controlling the 'enemy' within. Their warning was that this enemy cannot be contained –it is an ever-growing threat that could only be dealt with by withdrawing from its territory. But their scarier message was that, over the years, Israel's political leaders were not listening to the advise of their security experts: perhaps what they really meant –without quite putting their

fingers on it- was that the evolutionary course Israel was taking –and which may well have just turned into a self-automated colonization dynamic- ran counter to Israel’s interest as originally conceived. History seemed to be running its own course, and this wasn’t the course leading to the fulfillment of the Zionist dream. These security officers were being asked to contain a danger, even while Israeli policies –whether consciously or otherwise- were directly causing that danger to keep growing.

As an organism, Israel is not unique in having its seeds of downfall embedded in the very factors that made for its growth and success. In many ways, military, scientific and economic, Israel has proven itself to be a unique model for such success. Its military might and nuclear

capacity is beyond any question. But what use are these when the weakness lies within, when such is Israel's might and success that, paradoxically, it has dragged itself into a situation where no longer is that Zionist dream viable? When it has so successfully sunk its teeth into Arab territory, ingesting along with it large population chunks, which it can no longer delicately disgorge or pull itself out of? When such has been its political trajectory that its majority no longer even has the desire or the capacity to disentangle itself? Nor is the danger being pointed out here that of the occasional incendiary event, like that of the three kidnapped youth last week, leading to a heightened state of tension; or that of a potential bloody confrontation between religious Jews and Muslims on the Noble Sanctuary –also known as the Temple Mount. Or that of a third *intifada*,

now touted by *Hamas*. On the contrary, a worse scenario for Israel is if nothing like that were to happen at all –if the Palestinian population were to remain absolutely inactive or quiet, trying to make do with what little Israel leaves them with. Because, at the end, Israel will just wake up one day to find, having successfully implemented its plans, it is no longer itself. That is what the security chiefs were warning their leaders against.

Could this process be stopped, and the wheels of history be turned back? What might have worked at one point to address Jewish and Arab hopes –a fairly modest and simple two-state partition along the '67 borders- no longer seems feasible given the developmental and demographic patterns already explained. It is for these reasons, rather than for the lack of will, that

politicians on the whole have been finding it becoming more and more difficult to bring about such a solution. But also, and besides urban and demographic changes on the ground making a classic deal less and less likely, changes in the political landscape itself on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides since negotiations first began make such a deal infeasible. Today, neither the Israeli nor the Palestinian leadership is willing to give up what the other side will be able to accept –even assuming, given the fractures in both societies, that such leaderships did exist on both sides. Indeed, looking at the larger picture, a common-sense Israeli point of view now may be that a deal which does not rid Israel of a major portion of the Palestinians under its control will simply postpone the problem but not solve it. And a common-sense Palestinian point of view

now may be that a deal which does not allow for the repatriation of Palestinian refugees to their homes would not last.

For now, therefore, and for the near future also, the hard truth is that Palestinians and Israelis have to contend themselves with living in a dual system, controlled by Israel, but foreclosed as a Zionist dream by the Palestinians. In the short term, given the tectonic ruptures sweeping across the Arab world, where more people have already been savagely killed in the past few years than throughout the Palestinian Israeli conflict, maybe the lot of the Palestinians in an apartheid system does not compare so badly with that of their Arab compatriots. In any case, and unless we envisage a radical transformation of the parameters or ‘rules’ presently defining the conflict –such as further structural dismantlement in the

immediate Arab neighborhood, possibly leading to the reshaping of the political maps in the region, and involving large population shifts that may allow Israel finally to define its borders in a totally different setting -it stands to reason that Israelis primarily, but also Palestinians, must try to imagine new models for an equitable future of co-existence. What are left to hope for, in other words, are Post-Zionist outlooks, and fresh Palestinian solutions. If Jews and Arabs in Israel/Palestine are compelled –as they seem to be given the present rules of the game- to live side by side with each other -together in some ways, but apart in others, a new formula must, and will one day be found to accommodate that eventual solution. From the Israeli side, what a post-Zionist perspective might include, given it is perhaps more in Israel’s power to prepare

for such an eventuality, is a policy of gradual though controlled lifting of restrictions, and devolution of rights and authorities, both at the individual and collective levels. On the Palestinians side, a major ideological shift also must take place, replacing a pure nationalist or Islamicist dream by a pluralistic one. If the Zionist plan has outrun itself, Israelis concerned for the future have to begin to face this fact, and to draw up alternative plans for how they and their Palestinian counterparts can peacefully share their country together, in some form of condominium or confederation or federation or single political structure. And if Palestinian strength has essentially consisted in the ability to foreclose the Zionist dream, their challenge now is to construct a new positive dream, in which they and their Israeli counterparts can share

their country together. The road is admittedly long. But its contours by now have become fairly obvious.