

Organised by Habonim Dror and held at the Albow Centre which houses the Cape Town Holocaust Centre, the debate was with Ben Levitas (chair of the SA Zionist Federation's Cape Council) and Richard Mendelsohn (UCT professor specialising in Jewish history). Max Price (UCT Vice-Chancellor) was in the chair.

**2014-05-18**

## **Rob Petersen - speaker's notes for Habonim debate, Cape Town**

### **Opening remarks**

Thank you, Habonim, for your kind invitation to come here — and to do myself injury as an amateur in a debate with experts!

You obviously expect me to express my opinion.

In my opinion, the people of Israel must be supported in their desire to live within secure borders under the protection of a state on which they can rely.

In my opinion the Palestinian people have the same right to their own state, to security and self-protection, and to freedom from continued occupation by a conqueror. The Palestinians are trying to establish their state, and to have it recognised, and I believe that support for them in that endeavour is now the highest priority for all of us.

You can see then that, like many others outside and inside Israel, I am a supporter of the two-state approach to the Israel-Palestine problem. But I would not call it a 'solution'. I support it because no other approach offers progress now towards a long-run resolution of the conflict, and towards the freedom of the Palestinian people from oppression, both foreign and domestic.

In contrast, in my view, the 'one-state' idea is not only pie-in-the-sky — it is now definitely reactionary in all of its down-to-earth implications and effects, both among the Arabs and the Jews. I shall come back to that if there's time (which is very unlikely).

In saying this I should make it clear that I do not endorse Zionism in any form. The evidence presented by the Israeli historian Bennie Morris in his books *1948* and *Righteous Victims*, by the Israeli historian Tom Segev in *One Palestine Complete*, by Martin Gilbert in his *Israel - A History*, persuades me that every significant strand of Zionism had as its objective to take the land of Palestine from the Arabs.

That was done by relying from the outset on a combination of methods: on superior force *when it could be mustered*, on deception, on privileges while under British rule, and on the avarice of the Arab landlords in selling out their own downtrodden and exploited people. Though sharply divided internally over the appropriate mix of policy towards the Arabs, the Zionist state project always aimed at Jewish sovereignty over and against the then indigenous majority. In 1948 the inevitable war came, and in that bitter struggle for survival and conquest on both sides the state of Israel up to the Green Line achieved its blood-stained birth.

To attempt now to undo that fact — the fact of existence of the state of Israel — can only have the most monstrous consequences. I see no need to prettify the fact itself, or to pretend that it brought upon the Palestinian people *in general* anything but misery, dispossession, confinement and embitterment, and further subjection to alien powers (including Arab ones) in place of the former colonial masters.

The point is to move forward now from that fact.

In moving forward, the project of 'Greater Israel' needs to be explicitly repudiated, as it has been repudiated by increasing numbers of progressive Israelis and non-Israeli Jews.

The 'Green Line' — to which adjustments by negotiation are obviously possible — needs to be confirmed as the default divide between the territorial bases of the two states.

B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights, sums up in frank terms the creeping annexation that is carried on year by year under cover of the military occupation of the West Bank:

'Area C covers 60% of the West Bank: it is home to 180,000 Palestinians and to a settler population of at least 325,500 living in 125 settlements and approx. 100 outposts. Israel retains control of security and land-management in Area C and views the area as there to serve its own needs, such as military training, economic interests and settlement development. Ignoring Palestinian needs, Israel practically bans Palestinian construction and development. At the same time, it encourages the development of Israeli settlements through a parallel planning mechanism, and the Civil Administration turns a blind eye to settlers' building violations.'

You will be aware that Area C practically surrounds the Palestinian-controlled areas, cutting them off even from neighbouring Jordan.

It is well known how settler outposts are first established, usually on hilltops, in order thereafter to expand into settlements. Once settlers are there on the hilltop, even illegally, they have to be 'protected' when in fact they should be removed. Almost without exception, they are not removed.

Trees are planted on Palestinian land to act as settlers where settlers are lacking. I have seen outposts and plantations and their consequences in the hills south of Hebron. Once the trees are there, the trees also have to be 'protected' against Palestinian resistance to dispossession. All this requires soldiers, and soon enough the removal of Palestinian farmers from the surrounding land. Huge military firing zones are established from which Palestinians, of course, have to be excluded. Even archeological digs turn out to need a *cordon sanitaire*.

The process is remorseless, dishonest and utterly cynical.

Overlapping and conflicting systems of law are invoked and applied to confound the helpless. Ottoman law, Jordanian law, Israeli military law — as suits the case from the standpoint of the occupying power.

'You say this is your land, Palestinian! Where is your document of legal title? You don't have one? Not an Ottoman document, not a Jordanian document? You and your forebears have farmed or grazed this land from time immemorial? That's irrelevant; you have no rights. You need Israeli permission now. In particular you may not build, and your existing structures are illegal and must go. You can apply for a permit, of course, but you won't get one.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile you must leave the land; it will be treated as state land, and in your place, if we can find them, settlers will have a chance to move in.'

The attempts of Palestinians to cling to their grazing land and olive trees are met with calibrated repression. Homes and reconstructed shelters are systematically demolished by

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<sup>1</sup> Ilan Price reports in this week's *SA Jewish Report* (16 May 2014, p 8) that only 176 building permits were granted to Palestinians in Area C from 2002 to 2010, while the rate of Israeli settlement has increased sharply.

force. For a Palestinian family to install a small windmill on their own land to drive a generator is illegal and calls forth demolition.

It is a policy of enclosure, *de facto* annexation and forced removal to the towns in what are effectively intended as bantustans for Palestinians within the West Bank. Segregation, discrimination, dispossession — this is the basic character of the occupation, and all in the name of ‘security’ for Jews.

In the Jordan Valley and the Northern Dead Sea, the process has, if anything, been far more thorough-going. The May 2011 report by B’Tselem provides extensive detail. In short, by legal manipulation, more than half the land (four times more than pre-1967) is now deemed state land. On more than three-quarters of the land, Palestinians may not build, or use, or remain. Israel has taken control of most of the water sources in the area and has earmarked them for the almost exclusive use of the settlers — the basis for the intensive farming for export in that area. The water allocation to the settlements in the area is almost one-third the total quantity of water that is accessible to the 2.5 million Palestinians living in the West Bank.

Against the background of this creeping annexation, and built on it, we have the cynicism of ‘negotiations’ and the interminable so-called ‘peace process’.

The 1967 UN Security Council resolution 242 has rightly been described, I think, as ‘a road map to limbo’.<sup>2</sup> And the Oslo Accords seem now merely to have been more of the same. Some 60% of the Jewish settlers in the occupied territories have gone there since the Oslo Accords, and thus under the so-called ‘peace process’. I forget who described it as one party continuing to eat the pizza while pretending to negotiate over its division.

According to the Israeli ‘Peace Now’ organisation, during the nine months of the recently collapsed negotiations, the Netanyahu Government promoted plans and tenders for at least 13,851 housing units in the settlements and East Jerusalem — an average of 1,540 units per month.

‘Ah’, you might say, but those would be in areas that would probably eventually be included in Israel by negotiated adjustments to the Green Line? Not so! 73% of them are in isolated settlements; only 27% in settlements closer to the Green Line.<sup>3</sup> The intent to sabotage the negotiations was manifest.

Yet not all the news is bad news. The annexationist agenda is actually in difficulty, and the process is still reversible through much of the West Bank. ‘Peace Now’, while noting in October last year that the settler population had tripled since Oslo, also recorded that:

- \* 64% of that population growth was in settlements west of the 2003 Geneva Initiative Line (a serious basis for long-term agreement).
- \* Fully half of the settlement population growth was in only three settlements.
- \* East of the Geneva Initiative Line, the new settlers are almost exclusively religious ideological settlers who live in small isolated settlements of 20-30 families, where many live in mobile homes and most of the buildings are transportable.

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Black, chapter from his 1992 book *Parallel Realities*, reproduced on the pbs.org website.

<sup>3</sup> <http://peacenow.org.il/eng/9Months>

- \* In all, in October last year, the total number of settlers living east of the Geneva Initiative Line composed less than 2% of the Israeli population.

The so-called ‘peace process’ has acted as a cover for continued creeping annexation. What is needed in response is the very thing that has begun to occur now — the *unilateral* moves, with growing international support, for the recognition of the state of Palestine.

The decision of the UN General Assembly in November 2012 to accord Palestine ‘Non-Member Observer State’ status was a very important step,<sup>4</sup> and should be followed as soon as possible by full member status.

Far from being an obstacle to peace, I believe it will facilitate progress in that direction.

It necessarily implies the recognition of the right of the state of Israel to exist on the other side of the same border. At the same time, it will intensify the pressures for Israel to end the occupation, which it can do unilaterally. It deserves the active support of progressive Jews everywhere, and indeed of all progressive people.

There are many more aspects to all this, of course, but my time for opening remarks is up.

[Later:]

### **The demand for prior recognition of the ‘Jewish’ state?**

By insisting on prior recognition of Israel, not merely as a state entitled to exist for the protection of all its people within definite borders, but in addition as a ‘Jewish’ state, the government of Israel — along with the Zionist right wing everywhere — demands what it knows to be politically impossible, and what it should know to be unnecessary. But it effectively manipulates Jewish public opinion, of course, and places a deliberate obstacle in the way of practical agreement.

If the people of Israel, through their 75% Jewish majority, decide to continue the existence of the state of Israel proclaimed in 1948 as a ‘Jewish’ state, and born of war, that is a matter for them, a matter of their self-determination — albeit a continuing subject for democratic vigilance, debate and criticism on modern, secular grounds.<sup>5</sup> But to require *others*, the conquered and dispossessed, to endorse that characterisation as a precondition for their own rights of self-determination now to be allowed, indicates a conqueror’s arrogance which I find deplorable.

### **Return of the refugees?**

On the other hand, in my view, it cannot be expected of Israel or the majority of its people

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<sup>4</sup> Apart from the American dependencies of the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Panama and Palau, only Israel, the USA, Canada and the Czech Republic voted against. 138 states voted in favour, and 41 abstained.

<sup>5</sup> The 14 May 1948 declaration of the state of Israel declared it to be a Jewish state, but stated at the same time: “THE STATE OF ISRAEL will ... foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.” The extent to which Israel has honoured or broken these promises is a subject which would require a debate of its own.

to endorse a 'right of return' of all the refugees of 1948-9 and all the descendants of those refugees. In any case this will not happen. That impossibility serves, of course, as a politician's excuse for not facing realities on the Palestinian side.

But the relief of the refugees from their miserable confinement, their stateless and rightless condition within the Arab states, so that they may be accommodated, settled and supported economically within the state of Palestine, will require a major international effort in which Israel should be expected to contribute very substantially.

Again, the creation and recognition of the state of Palestine should proceed independently, in my view, with or without agreement on that issue. To approach it otherwise is surely to hold all progress to ransom with no prospect of real change.

### **Risks attendant on withdrawal**

It is said that, well, unilateral withdrawal from Gaza didn't turn out positively for Israel. Compared with what? Here is what Shimon Peres had to say in May 1993, when, during the secret Oslo talks, he reported to Rabin on what had been discussed there:

'... the 'Gaza first' concept, I stressed to Rabin, was most definitely in the interest of Israel: an overwhelming majority of Israelis wanted to get out of the teeming, terror-stricken Gaza Strip.'<sup>6</sup>

In other words, it was too dangerous to stay. Now we are told about the West Bank, that it is too dangerous to leave. The possibility of rocket fire from close proximity to Jewish residential neighbourhoods, to the airport, and so on, absolutely precludes it apparently. But this seems to me like one of those arguments one gets in law, that has some substance but doesn't amount to a case.

If ending the occupation is too dangerous to contemplate, too dangerous to manage, how come so many former and high-ranking Israeli army officers and former heads of the security services are in favour of withdrawal from the occupied territories?

The 'rocket fire' argument serves as an excuse for not withdrawing from the West Bank at all. Yet the undoubted dangers of proximity have not deterred Israel or Israelis from establishing West Bank settlements in the closest proximity to Palestinian towns and villages.

Already in 2010, I recall from my visit to Israel at that time, the claims in the press were that Hezbollah had 42,000 rockets stockpiled in south Lebanon, many capable of hitting Tel Aviv and some capable of reaching anywhere in Israel. At the same time the earlier attempt to hold south Lebanon by occupation had proved to be a fiasco. What is the inherent implication of the 'rocket fire' argument? The ranges of even the most portable rockets can be expected to increase.

That it's a rough neighbourhood, I don't doubt. Is it intended to lay waste to the whole neighbourhood from which rockets could be fired? Only the most rabid right-wingers and warmongers would propose it.

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<sup>6</sup> See Martin Gilbert, *Israel - A History*, p 562.

The answer is not occupation, surely, but agreement and peace, and the road to that is absolutely barred by continued occupation and settlement.

## **Conclusion**

I want to end by mentioning the Jerusalem-based organisation called Breaking the Silence, which I'm sure is known to many of you. It is an organisation of veterans of the Israel Defence Force whose experience of service in the occupied territories has convinced them that the occupation is not defensive but rather annexationist in character. They bravely publish their own and other soldiers' testimonies to bring the grim daily routine of the occupation, and its negative effects both on Palestinians and on Israelis, to the attention of their own country and the world.<sup>7</sup>

I would suggest to you that theirs is a loyalty, courage and commitment of the highest order.

The same applies, in my view, to the courage and commitment of young Jewish activists in this country, like Nathan Geffen and Doron Isaacs — the latter with a background in the leadership of Habonim — who have dared to stand up, speak out and face ostracism as a result. I commend them.

These are the people that encourage and inspire me with optimism for the future.

The current campaign by Habonim itself marks a courageous step. I wish you well in carrying it forward.

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<sup>7</sup> A review of their book, *Our Harsh Logic*, sums it up: in their own words the soldiers reveal in detail how the key planks of the army's ostensibly protective program—"prevention of terror," "separation of populations," "preservation of the fabric of life," and "law enforcement"—have in fact served to accelerate acquisition of Palestinian land, cripple all normal political and social life, and thwart the possibility of independence.