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A Place for Our Dream?

by
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As the wrangling over the roadmap continues and the Palestinian people are subjected to unprecedented new forms of horror, we may find it helpful to put details of the horrors to one side for a moment, and sketch a general overview of the situation.

Since the Oslo process, the Israelis have engaged in a deliberate and programmed attempt to change the status quo to an extent unprecedented during the previous 27 years of occupation, destroying any prospects for peace. The building of settlements has continued unabated—over 100 new settlements have been created, and the number of Israeli settlers has doubled. Not only are the settlements themselves often on a large scale, but they need an intricate network of roads to link them to each other and to Israel. The aim has not been to create houses for an expanding Israeli population, but to change the economic and political geography of the Occupied Territories. Through its settlement activities, Israel has sought to transform the West Bank into ethnically Israeli territory, in which Palestinian villages and towns are nothing more than isolated outposts.

Unless they can work out some form of democratic collective leadership, the Palestinians may lose more than just their land.

In line with Israel's attempts to change the facts on the ground, it has increased its demands, whilst the Palestinians have progressively been forced to lower theirs. The Palestinians were prepared to accept a mere 22 percent of historic Palestine, instead of the 45 percent granted to them under the UN partition plan of 1947. However, following the Oslo accords, the illusion that there might be a two state solution based on the 1967 borders, quickly evaporated. The subsequent negotiations essentially centered on how the West Bank itself should be divided between the two sides. These negotiations culminated in the Camp David Peace Proposals in July 2000 where the

Palestinians were asked to accept an offer of a so called state to be located on four separate cantons, with borders, airspace and water being controlled by Israel.

Following the Palestinians rejection of the Camp David offer, Israel launched further attack on the Palestinians, this time using the World's media. Intensifying their engagement with public relations exercises, Israel presented the situation as a military conflict between two equal sides; the Occupied Territories became "Disputed" Territories and the Palestinian's legitimate demand of the right of return for refugees, was presented as their demand to destroy the Israeli State.

When engaged in peace negotiations following Oslo, Israel has remained firmly committed to three basic rules:

1. No Palestinian entity should be allowed to control its borders with any other state. Any future Palestinian entity must be, in effect, "borderless"— forever surrounded, whether through temporary or permanent measures, by Israeli populations and the Israeli army.
2. Any authority the Palestinian entity or self-rule government may have should remain functional, not sovereign.
3. No arrangements or agreements concluded with the Palestinians or Arabs (and here, Oslo is a case in point) should be allowed to hinder Israel's ability to change the status quo and create new facts on the ground in the occupied territories.

Why bother with the Roadmap?

SO WHY IS ANYONE BOTHERING WITH THE ROADMAP? Why has Sharon himself apparently now accepted the idea of a Palestinian state? And why doesn't Israel annex all the occupied territories, just as it has annexed Jerusalem and the Golan?

Despite all its efforts, Israel has still not found a solution to the demographic problem posed by the Palestinians. Having learned the hard lesson of 1948, Palestinians who are still living on their land have refused to leave, their numbers have continued to increase, and they have committed themselves to

a life of struggle, to strengthening their institutional structures, to enhancing their nation's awareness of its rights, and to rallying international support.

Israel has found no military way of ending the Intifada and the Palestinian struggle despite trying this more than once. It has been practically impossible to get the inhabitants of the occupied territories to leave their homes—the infamous “transfer” about which Sharon has long fantasized. The last chance for Israel to carry out such a “transfer” came during the recent war on Iraq, but even then, no attempt could be made. There are limits to what the Israeli force can achieve, even when that force is overwhelming.

The collapse of the Israeli economy under the pressures generated by the Intifada is clear for all to see. Today, Israel is suffering the worst recession in its history, accompanied by the highest levels of unemployment and capital flight the country has ever known. Israel's losses since the beginning of the Intifada have been estimated at \$23 billion. Per capita income has dropped by 12 percent. This, together with the other human losses, is why Israel sought so hard to sustain the conflict.

Despite all their continued efforts to preserve International support, the actions of the Israeli occupying army, have not escaped the World's attention and Israel is suffering a dramatic loss of credibility. Even in the United States where the pro-Israel lobby is strong, President George W. Bush has been unable to brush aside the two basic conditions for any viable settlement: the establishment of an independent and democratic Palestinian state, and the termination of the 1967 occupation. Public support for Israel in many European countries has virtually collapsed. Even some European parliaments are openly critical of the state. Arab normalization with Israel has ground to a halt.

At the same time, support at grassroots level for the Palestinians is increasing at a tremendous pace. Israel's intensified invasions into the West Bank, which began in March 2002, increased the rate at which support is growing. Solidarity movements are springing up across the globe, some of which are providing the Palestinians with direct protection. Despite Israel's protests, the Palestinian solidarity movement has joined forces with the worldwide anti-globalization campaign, and the two are mutually strengthening one another. Today, Palestinian liberation has become the foremost national liberation cause in the world.

So, what does the government of Israel want? To put it simply, it wants a new truce—a second Oslo, which will give it the time to carve off what remains of the occupied territories and break what remains of the resolve of the Palestinian national movement.

Enter the Roadmap. Sharon's aim is and always has been, the Judaization and annexation of most of the West Bank and Gaza. Having fiercely condemned the Roadmap, mainly because of its call to end settlement building, he has nevertheless agreed to it (with of course 100 alterations to the text). This is because his aim may still be carried out, under the disguise of a call for an interim state. An interim state will allow the Israelis to once again postpone indefinitely all discussion of such essential matters as borders, the refugees, the settlements, and Jerusalem.

Their hope, of course, is that in time these matters will become impossible to resolve, and so the search for a solution can simply be abandoned.

Israel is proposing a Palestinian state on 42 percent of the land occupied in 1967. This would effectively reduce an "independent" Palestinian state to a collection of geographically disconnected enclaves, a "state" with no sovereignty or borders. The Palestinians may be allowed to carry on living in ghettos but there will be no prospect of transforming their ghettos into a feasible state. Whilst this solution may be sold to the Palestinians as "temporary," as we have seen with Oslo, the temporary will soon become permanent. We are being asked to give up our rights so that we may live in permanent slavery under the worst system of racist apartheid in history.

The Road Ahead

In the face of Sharon's plans for ghettoization and apartheid, the Palestinian National Initiative, a democratic opposition movement launched in June 2002, calls for the need to deploy all four of the fundamental methods that we have at our disposal.

1- Free elections

Free and democratic elections should be held as soon as possible. Part of the Israeli and to some extent International attack, has been that while the

Israelis are democratic, the Palestinians are not. Elections will put a stop to this accusation. A democratic Palestinian government may lead the Palestinians in the struggle to build an independent, viable state, with internal reform, accountability and transparency. Peace negotiations will also be more effective, and less vulnerable to high jacking by extremists, as the Palestinian government will be representing the needs of the people.

2- Rejection of partial solutions

As Palestinians, we must insist on the establishment of an independent state with full sovereignty. We should therefore regard with caution any stage defined as an “interim state.” We should insist that all issues relating to the final peace settlement be addressed and resolved: settlements, borders, Jerusalem, and the refugees. Truly temporary measures should only be used to alleviate pressure for a solution and return the crisis to square one, as happened under Oslo.

3- Support for the disenfranchised

The Palestinian National Initiative has called for the energizing of the potentials of the Palestinian people and for the deployment of this potential in the struggle for liberation and independence. To do this, we must provide sufficient support for the working and disenfranchised sections of the population in the Occupied Territories.

On the political level, we need to free our political system from outdated restrictions, open the system to full participation, particularly by women and the young, redistribute resources in a manner that supports the steadfastness of the poor and underprivileged and their ability to stay in their homeland, and energize our human resources—the main source of our vigor—to the greatest possible extent.

4- Rallying International solidarity

WE NEED TO RALLY THE SUPPORT OF THE GROWING INTERNATIONAL solidarity movement. One day, history will perhaps record that the foremost

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achievement of the Intifada was to revive the support of the international solidarity movement for the Palestinian people, which had dwindled due to our failure to defend our own rights effectively, and the false impression produced by Oslo that peace had been achieved, when actually the claws of occupation and settlement had never ceased tearing Palestinian land apart.

The creation of the grass-roots international campaign to protect the Palestinians (GIPP) was a brilliant step towards reshaping the international solidarity movement. And that solidarity movement can expand yet further. If we can combine the international solidarity movement and our own national resistance, we will generate a force comparable to that, which fought apartheid in South Africa, a force capable of exposing the ills of occupation and settlements and bringing to an end the occupation, and racism from which our people have long suffered.

If all of the above were to be achieved, it would provide at last a partial vindication for our people after a century, if not centuries, of suffering. For generations, we have known nothing but oppressive foreign rule, and have had to put up with persecution and injustice. For centuries, we never had a chance to rule ourselves, determine our own future, plan our lives, and live in freedom and pride. Yet despite this, we have been able to transcend our suffering, banish our sense of victimization, and focus on self-improvement and education. Scientific, professional, and national struggle has become, for each one of us, a way of paying homage to our beloved Palestine.

The Palestinian National Initiative can open up new horizons for the Palestinian people and enable us to revive our potential, consolidate our resolve, energize our struggle, and attain our goal of a free, peaceful, independent, and democratic state. As difficult as it looks, I'm fully confident that there is a place for our dream; there is a place for peace and for Palestine.

Mustapha Barghouti is internationally recognized as physician, human rights advocate and Secretary General of the Palestinian National Initiative. A long time resident of Ramallah, he has, as Director of the Palestinian Medical Relief Committee, been dedicated to expanding health care for Palestinians under conditions of extreme duress, conditions that he has tirelessly sought to publicize in an effort to alleviate the suffering of Palestinians under Israeli occupation.