

Nick Kardahji

The Logic of the Israeli Left

by
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Several months have now passed since the official launch of the Geneva Accord at a glitzy ceremony in Geneva. Between October when the Accord was signed in Jordan and the first few weeks of this year there was a flurry of opinion pieces and articles about the document. A wide variety of views have been expressed ranging from indifference to outrage, and from enthusiastic praise for a valiant effort for peace, to angry condemnation of the betrayal of the national cause.

By far the most interesting and revealing piece was written by Menachem Klein, one of the Accord's negotiators, in this journal earlier in the year.¹ In that article he outlined in detail the premises on which the Accord was based, and the aims it is intended to fulfill. In this response to Dr. Klein, I intend to briefly discuss some problems with the arguments he presents for the document's stipulations, and then touch on larger issues surrounding the context and aims of the initiative and those who produced it.

Devilish Details

I found much of what Klein had to say about the details of the Accord to be highly contentious, but for reasons of space I will only discuss a few of the most problematic arguments he offers. Firstly there is the ubiquitous question of "security," meaning of course security for Israelis. Klein makes the standard case that peace, and land for the Palestinians, must be premised upon security for the Israeli people. However it is customary when making such arguments to stress what are considered to be "genuine" dangers and real "existential" threats. Klein however, makes this quite extraordinary remark,

The Palestinians ... could not understand how it is that this regional superpower perceives such a deep threat to its security. After all, the Palestinians are the weak side in the conflict and have suffered at the strong arm of Israel over the years. As the side that has incurred the heaviest losses, they were amazed by

Israel's deep-rooted sense of an existential threat to its security.

And later on,

In the end, the Palestinians understood that they must show consideration for Israel's psychological needs in the security sphere

No attempt is made by Klein to analyze this argument in any detail. Why should Palestinians "show consideration" for Israel's *psychological* security concerns, when doing so entails serious restrictions on the sovereignty of the proposed Palestinian entity? He implies that although Israel faces no real threat from the Palestinians, Israelis *think* that they do and hence the Palestinians must respond to this. But why should they, and since when have legal treaties been founded upon "psychology" rather than political realities?

He argues that the Palestinian entity will have "full territorial sovereignty," but in fact the lack of an army, the lack of full control over its borders and ports, and the presence of foreign troops on its soil (including the Israeli Army) are clearly a serious infringement of its independence. Furthermore, having acknowledged that it is the Palestinians and not the Israelis who have suffered most from external aggression, this begs the question of why the Palestinian entity should be demilitarized and not the Israeli state. After all, it is the latter which has proven itself to be the greatest source of regional instability as even the most cursory glance at the history of the last fifty years conclusively demonstrates.

The second issue is the fate of Jerusalem. Klein describes Israel's illegal distortion and "Judaization" of the city since its complete occupation in 1967 as "accomplishments". He also claims that Jerusalem is already divided, and that what seems to be a plan to pull one organic, integrated city into two entities (for which there is no positive precedent anywhere in the world), is in fact a proposal to complete the separation of two independent urban spaces. He argues that,

The divide between the two cities runs deep, and only a small number of Palestinian workers cross the ethnic lines for a few hours a day. It is in the interest of both the Israelis and the Palestinians to partition the city in order to allow both cities to develop in their natural space.

The fact that few people genuinely think of Jerusalem as really being two cities is evident from Klein's confusion in the last sentence where he mentions "*the city*" and then refers to "*both cities*." Which is it, one city or two cities? Ethnic and economic factors divide many cities in the world, but it does not follow that the solution to this is to pull them apart into two new urban entities. The fact that extensive cooperation in the form of joint municipal committees is envisaged further implies a high degree of integration. If Jerusalem is really two cities, why the need for such bodies?

There is also the question of whether splitting the city is really going to help the Eastern, Palestinian districts develop. After all it seems somewhat counter-intuitive to claim that extracting the less economically successful parts of the city from potential markets and sources of employment will somehow help them to become more prosperous. Add to this the fact that Klein envisages a "fence" dividing the city, and the argument seems even more tenuous. He claims that East Jerusalem "faces the West Bank", but in reality, the West Bank faces Jerusalem which is the gateway to jobs and a better economic future for destitute Palestinians.

Klein also seems to be oblivious to the warnings that history provides with regards to dividing up cities with walls. The fate of Berlin should be instructive in this case, but Klein is apparently not interested in whether or not Jerusalem will be a better place to live and a more viable city for all its residents after this barrier is constructed. Klein claims his Jerusalem fence will be (unlike its West Bank counterpart) "user and environmentally friendly." Given that its function is essentially the same, i.e. to keep Palestinians locked away, what does this actually amount to in practice? Perhaps he means the fence will be biodegradable.

He also fails to clarify where exactly the fence will run, which brings me to the other major problem with the Accord's "Jerusalem solution." Pulling the city apart into two entities might possibly be feasible if in fact that was what the Accord was calling for, but it isn't. In reality the Accord envisages creating a Palestinian canton *within* Jewish Jerusalem, one which is to be isolated from the rest of the city and partly cut off from the Palestinian "state." The reason for this is the Jewish settlements East Jerusalem, constructed with the aim of encircling the Arab districts and preventing any realistic prospect of unity between them and the West Bank.

The Geneva Accord acquiesces to this reality and calls for the settlements to be annexed to Israel. This creates two problems. Firstly the East

Jerusalem settlements are not like the isolated fortresses of the West Bank and Gaza, they are much more like neighborhoods, intermingled with Palestinian districts. Separating them is like carving up a city, dividing its neighborhoods one from the other. How will this work in practice? Will Klein's fence encircle these settlements too, and if so what will that mean for the Palestinians?

This relates to the second problem which is that dividing the city up in this way cannot be beneficial for both sides at the same time. The Accord wants to maintain continuity between the areas belonging to each community, but clearly, given how interconnected these districts are, one side can only achieve territorial unity at the expense of the other. And this is of course what has happened to the Palestinians. For example, the road (which will be Israeli sovereign territory) connecting the settlement of Ma'ale Adumim to West Jerusalem will sever the link between Palestinian Jerusalem and Ramallah, making it much harder for northern West Bankers to reach the capital. It will also disrupt the north-south link between Bethlehem and Ramallah. This does not apparently constitute an obstacle to the growth and development of the putative Palestinian capital.

Finally I want to touch upon a remark Klein makes about the Accord's solution to the refugee issue. Klein admits that the Accord offers the refugees nothing concrete with respect to their right to return to their homes in Israel as stipulated in international law. He acknowledges that it will be up to a future Israeli government to decide the precise numbers who will be allowed back home, and it is entirely possible that the number they choose will be zero. The refugees, Klein says, must "hope" that a future administration is feeling disposed to fulfill their rights. Given past experience one must admit that this is not very encouraging.

But the most remarkable comment comes later in this section of his essay when he discusses Israel's admission of its guilt for what happened in 1948. Klein says this:

In order for the popular Israeli narrative to change and conform with the findings of academic research, Israel needs reassurances with regard to its fear that the outcome of the 1948 war will be overturned. Only when Israel is confident that its darkest nightmare will not come true will the time come for it to apologize for its role in creating the refugee problem.

In other words, Klein seems to be saying that Israel *is* responsible for the dispossession of the entire Palestinian nation, but Israelis will only admit that fact when they receive concrete guarantees that nothing will be done to rectify such an injustice. This is rather like a murderer telling his lawyer, “I’m guilty, but unless the judge assures me he won’t send me to prison, I won’t admit it.” Klein’s comments are perhaps a clear indication that Israelis see the existence of their state as taking precedence over justice for the Palestinians, and indeed the two are viewed as (and quite possibly are) incompatible.

Fending off the “Hordes”

THERE ARE SEVERAL OTHER AREAS OF KLEIN’S TREATMENT of the details of the Accord which I could take issue with, but instead I would like to turn to the conclusion of his piece. Here he discusses the philosophy behind the Accord and the premises upon which negotiations were based. He tells us that “absolute justice” cannot be achieved (a remark that Yasser Abed Rabbo has also made, perhaps as a way of excusing himself) although as far as I am aware the Palestinians aren’t asking for *absolute* justice, merely *some* justice.

Klein also tells us that in past negotiations “Israel saw only its own interest” and “only its own interests ... determin[ed] what the other side [i.e. the Palestinians] will receive”, implying that the Geneva Accord has bucked this regrettable trend. However Klein undermines his own argument only a few paragraphs later. He tells us that the Geneva Accord “does not create equality between Israel and Palestine”, and points out that the new state will be founded upon little more than a fifth of the original Palestinian homeland. Furthermore it will be beset by social and economic problems, all of which raises the question:

What ... will prevent it from striving in the future to correct the “historical injustice” and cancel the agreement it was forced to accept out of a position of weakness?

A fundamental question, indeed. Fortunately we don’t have to wait long for an answer. Klein reminds us in the next paragraph that the huge military imbalance will remain between the two states. Furthermore he tells us later on that although the section of the Accord dealing with economic relations has not yet been written, if and when its articles are written they “are not expected to create economic equality between Israel

and Palestine.” Of course this may simply be a decision to acquiesce in the face of huge economic disparities, rather than a deliberate scheme to keep Palestinians impoverished. However Klein then tells us that

In brief, the large economic and military gap between Israel and Palestine will remain. Even if the radical Islamic forces come to power in Palestine, they will be unable to realize their dream.

Klein seems to be saying that the economic gap is a *necessary* feature of relations between the two states as a means of protecting Israel against Palestinians who are angry at the unjust “solution” that has been forced upon them. How else should one interpret such a statement? He is quite openly telling us that Palestine will be an impoverished entity on a fraction of the land with no means of defending itself against its aggressive neighbor.

Klein’s assertions leave us in little doubt that, despite his claims to the contrary, the Accord is yet another attempt to perpetuate Israeli hegemony and to deny the Palestinians even a modicum of justice. It goes without saying that no Palestinian (apart perhaps from those who chose to sign it) would willingly embrace such a plan, and as Klein admits in the above quote they would only do so in the future out of weakness and a lack of alternatives. After all why should Palestinians accept a future of economic misery in a giant ghetto, simply so that Israel’s status as an exclusively Jewish state on as much of the land as possible is assured? There is of course no reason why they should and Klein is wrong to believe that even in a weak position they would choose to do so.

The uncompromising arrogance of individuals such as Klein, who are desperate to make the two-state solution work in order to fend off the Palestinian “hordes” that threaten to undo Israel as a purely Jewish state, but not desperate enough to offer real concessions, is likely to finally bury this option as a genuine possibility. Increasing numbers of leftist Israelis are beginning to realize that the two-state solution is on its deathbed and that if Israel was genuinely interested in it concrete action should have been taken a long time ago. The Geneva Accord is highly unlikely to change this reality and, I sincerely hope, it will help to usher in an era where we focus solely on one-state models.

A thorough reading of the Accord and Klein’s commentary would seem to confirm the view that the Israeli Left shares the Right’s maximalist and

survivalist outlook; maximalist in the sense that it seeks to concede the minimum possible amount of land, and survivalist because of a desire to protect the Jewish majority in Israel at almost any price. The difference between them amounts to where they choose to draw the line between what is acceptable and what isn't. No one in mainstream Israeli politics is considering the best interests of the Palestinian people, which is fine of course except that it is only a matter of time before the latter release that their interests are far better served by a solution which is not compatible with the existence of an exclusive ethnocracy.

For the Palestinian Geneva team, Klein is an unwelcome intrusion on their attempts to market the agreement to a skeptical Palestinian public. Klein's brazen honesty threatens to undermine their claims that the Accord is in the best interests of Palestinians, and indeed threatens support for the two-state non-solution in general. Already it is clear that the two teams are marketing the Accord in very different ways, with maps of far greater detail being made available to the Hebrew-speaking public. This is inevitable given the inequity of the agreement. The real question though is why the Palestinian team, some of whom are supposedly independent people of integrity, chose to sign this document in the first place.

Notes

¹ Menachem Klein, "The Logic of the Geneva Accord," *Logos* Winter 2004.

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