Israel: The Alternative

By Tony Judt

The Middle East peace process is finished. It did not die: it was killed. Mahmoud Abbas was undermined by the President of the Palestinian Authority and humiliated by the Prime Minister of Israel. His successor awaits a similar fate. Israel continues to mock its American patron, building illegal settlements in cynical disregard of the "road map." The President of the United States of America has been reduced to a ventriloquist's dummy, pitifully reciting the Israeli cabinet line: "It's all Arafat's fault." Israelis themselves grimly await the next bomber. Palestinian Arabs, corralled into shrinking Bantustans, subsist on EU handouts. On the corpse-strewn landscape of the Fertile Crescent, Ariel Sharon, Yasser Arafat, and a handful of terrorists can all claim victory, and they do. Have we reached the end of the road? What is to be done?

At the dawn of the twentieth century, in the twilight of the continental empires, Europe's subject peoples dreamed of forming "nation-states," territorial homelands where Poles, Czechs, Serbs, Armenians, and others might live free, masters of their own fate. When the Habsburg and Romanov empires collapsed after World War I, their leaders seized the opportunity. A flurry of new states emerged; and the first thing they did was set about privileging their national, "ethnic" majority—defined by language, or religion, or antiquity, or all three—at the expense of inconvenient local minorities, who were consigned to second-class status: permanently resident strangers in their own home.

But one nationalist movement, Zionism, was frustrated in its ambitions. The dream of an appropriately sited Jewish national home in the middle of the defunct Turkish Empire had to wait upon the retreat of imperial Britain: a process that took three more decades and a second world war. And thus it was only in 1948 that a Jewish nation-state was established in formerly Ottoman Palestine. But the founders of the Jewish state had been influenced by the same concepts and categories as their fin-de-siècle contemporaries back in Warsaw, or Odessa, or Bucharest; not surprisingly, Israel's ethno-religious self-definition, and its discrimination against internal "foreigners," has always had more in common with, say, the practices of post-Habsburg Romania than either party might care to acknowledge.

The problem with Israel, in short, is not—as is sometimes suggested—that it is a European "enclave" in the Arab world; but rather that it arrived too late. It has imported a characteristically late-nineteenth-century separatist project into a world that has moved on, a world of individual rights, open frontiers, and international law. The very idea of a "Jewish
state"—a state in which Jews and the Jewish religion have exclusive privileges from which non-Jewish citizens are forever excluded—is rooted in another time and place. Israel, in short, is an anachronism.

In one vital attribute, however, Israel is quite different from previous insecure, defensive microstates born of imperial collapse: it is a democracy. Hence its present dilemma. Thanks to its occupation of the lands conquered in 1967, Israel today faces three unattractive choices. It can dismantle the Jewish settlements in the territories, return to the 1967 state borders within which Jews constitute a clear majority, and thus remain both a Jewish state and a democracy, albeit one with a constitutionally anomalous community of second-class Arab citizens.

Alternatively, Israel can continue to occupy "Samaria," "Judea," and Gaza, whose Arab population—added to that of present-day Israel—will become the demographic majority within five to eight years: in which case Israel will be either a Jewish state (with an ever-larger majority of unenfranchised non-Jews) or it will be a democracy. But logically it cannot be both.

Or else Israel can keep control of the Occupied Territories but get rid of the overwhelming majority of the Arab population: either by forcible expulsion or else by starving them of land and livelihood, leaving them no option but to go into exile. In this way Israel could indeed remain both Jewish and at least formally democratic: but at the cost of becoming the first modern democracy to conduct full-scale ethnic cleansing as a state project, something which would condemn Israel forever to the status of an outlaw state, an international pariah.

Anyone who supposes that this third option is unthinkable above all for a Jewish state has not been watching the steady accretion of settlements and land seizures in the West Bank over the past quarter-century, or listening to generals and politicians on the Israeli right, some of them currently in government. The middle ground of Israeli politics today is occupied by the Likud. Its major component is the late Menachem Begin's Herut Party. Herut is the successor to Vladimir Jabotinsky's interwar Revisionist Zionists, whose uncompromising indifference to legal and territorial niceties once attracted from left-leaning Zionists the epithet "fascist." When one hears Israel's deputy prime minister, Ehud Olmert, proudly insist that his country has not excluded the option of assassinating the elected president of the Palestinian Authority, it is clear that the label fits better than ever. Political murder is what fascists do.

The situation of Israel is not desperate, but it may be close to hopeless. Suicide bombers will never bring down the Israeli state, and the Palestinians have no other weapons. There are indeed Arab radicals who will not rest until every Jew is pushed into the Mediterranean, but they represent no strategic threat to Israel, and the Israeli military knows it. What sensible Israelis fear much more than Hamas or the al-Aqsa Brigade is the steady emergence of an Arab majority in "Greater Israel," and above all the erosion of the political culture and civic morale of their society. As the prominent Labor politician Avraham Burg recently wrote, "After two thousand years of struggle for survival, the reality of Israel is a colonial state, run by a corrupt clique which scorns and mocks law and civic morality." Unless something changes, Israel in half a decade will be neither Jewish nor democratic.
This is where the US enters the picture. Israel's behavior has been a disaster for American foreign policy. With American support, Jerusalem has consistently and blatantly flouted UN resolutions requiring it to withdraw from land seized and occupied in war. Israel is the only Middle Eastern state known to possess genuine and lethal weapons of mass destruction. By turning a blind eye, the US has effectively scuttled its own increasingly frantic efforts to prevent such weapons from falling into the hands of other small and potentially belligerent states. Washington's unconditional support for Israel even in spite of (silent) misgivings is the main reason why most of the rest of the world no longer credits our good faith.

It is now tacitly conceded by those in a position to know that America's reasons for going to war in Iraq were not necessarily those advertised at the time. For many in the current US administration, a major strategic consideration was the need to destabilize and then reconfigure the Middle East in a manner thought favorable to Israel. This story continues. We are now making belligerent noises toward Syria because Israeli intelligence has assured us that Iraqi weapons have been moved there—a claim for which there is no corroborating evidence from any other source. Syria backs Hezbollah and the Islamic Jihad: sworn foes of Israel, to be sure, but hardly a significant international threat. However, Damascus has hitherto been providing the US with critical data on al-Qaeda. Like Iran, another longstanding target of Israeli wrath whom we are actively alienating, Syria is more use to the United States as a friend than an enemy. Which war are we fighting?

On September 16, 2003, the US vetoed a UN Security Council resolution asking Israel to desist from its threat to deport Yasser Arafat. Even American officials themselves recognize, off the record, that the resolution was reasonable and prudent, and that the increasingly wild pronouncements of Israel's present leadership, by restoring Arafat's standing in the Arab world, are a major impediment to peace. But the US blocked the resolution all the same, further undermining our credibility as an honest broker in the region. America's friends and allies around the world are no longer surprised at such actions, but they are saddened and disappointed all the same.

Israeli politicians have been actively contributing to their own difficulties for many years; why do we continue to aid and abet them in their mistakes? The US has tentatively sought in the past to pressure Israel by threatening to withhold from its annual aid package some of the money that goes to subsidizing West Bank settlers. But the last time this was attempted, during the Clinton administration, Jerusalem got around it by taking the money as "security expenditure." Washington went along with the subterfuge, and of $10 billion of American aid over four years, between 1993 and 1997, less than $775 million was kept back. The settlement program went ahead unimpeded. Now we don't even try to stop it.

This reluctance to speak or act does no one any favors. It has also corroded American domestic debate. Rather than think straight about the Middle East, American politicians and pundits slander our European allies when they dissent, speak glibly and irresponsibly of resurgent anti-Semitism when Israel is criticized, and censoriously rebuke any public figure at home who tries to break from the consensus.

But the crisis in the Middle East won't go away. President Bush will probably be conspicuous by his absence from the fray for the coming year, having said just enough about the "road map" in June to placate Tony Blair. But sooner or later an American statesman is
going to have to tell the truth to an Israeli prime minister and find a way to make him listen. Israeli liberals and moderate Palestinians have for two decades been thanklessly insisting that the only hope was for Israel to dismantle nearly all the settlements and return to the 1967 borders, in exchange for real Arab recognition of those frontiers and a stable, terrorist-free Palestinian state underwritten (and constrained) by Western and international agencies. This is still the conventional consensus, and it was once a just and possible solution.

But I suspect that we are already too late for that. There are too many settlements, too many Jewish settlers, and too many Palestinians, and they all live together, albeit separated by barbed wire and pass laws. Whatever the "road map" says, the real map is the one on the ground, and that, as Israelis say, reflects facts. It may be that over a quarter of a million heavily armed and subsidized Jewish settlers would leave Arab Palestine voluntarily; but no one I know believes it will happen. Many of those settlers will die—and kill—rather than move. The last Israeli politician to shoot Jews in pursuit of state policy was David Ben-Gurion, who forcibly disarmed Begin's illegal Irgun militia in 1948 and integrated it into the new Israel Defense Forces. Ariel Sharon is not Ben-Gurion.²

The time has come to think the unthinkable. The two-state solution— the core of the Oslo process and the present "road map"— is probably already doomed. With every passing year we are postponing an inevitable, harder choice that only the far right and far left have so far acknowledged, each for its own reasons. The true alternative facing the Middle East in coming years will be between an ethnically cleansed Greater Israel and a single, integrated, binational state of Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians. That is indeed how the hard-liners in Sharon's cabinet see the choice; and that is why they anticipate the removal of the Arabs as the ineluctable condition for the survival of a Jewish state.

But what if there were no place in the world today for a "Jewish state"? What if the binational solution were not just increasingly likely, but actually a desirable outcome? It is not such a very odd thought. Most of the readers of this essay live in pluralist states which have long since become multiethnic and multicultural. "Christian Europe," pace M. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, is a dead letter; Western civilization today is a patchwork of colors and religions and languages, of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Arabs, Indians, and many others—as any visitor to London or Paris or Geneva will know.³

Israel itself is a multicultural society in all but name; yet it remains distinctive among democratic states in its resort to ethnoreligious criteria with which to denominate and rank its citizens. It is an oddity among modern nations not—as its more paranoid supporters assert—because it is a Jewish state and no one wants the Jews to have a state; but because it is a Jewish state in which one community—Jews—is set above others, in an age when that sort of state has no place.

For many years, Israel had a special meaning for the Jewish people. After 1948 it took in hundreds of thousands of helpless survivors who had nowhere else to go; without Israel their condition would have been desperate in the extreme. Israel needed Jews, and Jews needed Israel. The circumstances of its birth have thus bound Israel's identity inextricably to the Shoah, the German project to exterminate the Jews of Europe. As a result, all criticism of Israel is drawn ineluctably back to the memory of that project, something that Israel's American apologists are shamefully quick to exploit. To find fault with the Jewish state is to
think ill of Jews; even to imagine an alternative configuration in the Middle East is to indulge the moral equivalent of genocide.

In the years after World War II, those many millions of Jews who did not live in Israel were often reassured by its very existence—whether they thought of it as an insurance policy against renascent anti-Semitism or simply a reminder to the world that Jews could and would fight back. Before there was a Jewish state, Jewish minorities in Christian societies would peer anxiously over their shoulders and keep a low profile; since 1948, they could walk tall. But in recent years, the situation has tragically reversed.

Today, non-Israeli Jews feel themselves once again exposed to criticism and vulnerable to attack for things they didn't do. But this time it is a Jewish state, not a Christian one, which is holding them hostage for its own actions. Diaspora Jews cannot influence Israeli policies, but they are implicitly identified with them, not least by Israel's own insistent claims upon their allegiance. The behavior of a self-described Jewish state affects the way everyone else looks at Jews. The increased incidence of attacks on Jews in Europe and elsewhere is primarily attributable to misdirected efforts, often by young Muslims, to get back at Israel. The depressing truth is that Israel's current behavior is not just bad for America, though it surely is. It is not even just bad for Israel itself, as many Israelis silently acknowledge. The depressing truth is that Israel today is bad for the Jews.

In a world where nations and peoples increasingly intermingle and intermarry at will; where cultural and national impediments to communication have all but collapsed; where more and more of us have multiple elective identities and would feel falsely constrained if we had to answer to just one of them; in such a world Israel is truly an anachronism. And not just an anachronism but a dysfunctional one. In today's "clash of cultures" between open, pluralist democracies and belligerently intolerant, faith-driven ethno-states, Israel actually risks falling into the wrong camp.

To convert Israel from a Jewish state to a binational one would not be easy, though not quite as impossible as it sounds: the process has already begun de facto. But it would cause far less disruption to most Jews and Arabs than its religious and nationalist foes will claim. In any case, no one I know of has a better idea: anyone who genuinely supposes that the controversial electronic fence now being built will resolve matters has missed the last fifty years of history. The "fence"—actually an armored zone of ditches, fences, sensors, dirt roads (for tracking footprints), and a wall up to twenty-eight feet tall in places—occupies, divides, and steals Arab farmland; it will destroy villages, livelihoods, and whatever remains of Arab-Jewish community. It costs approximately $1 million per mile and will bring nothing but humiliation and discomfort to both sides. Like the Berlin Wall, it confirms the moral and institutional bankruptcy of the regime it is intended to protect.

A binational state in the Middle East would require a brave and relentlessly engaged American leadership. The security of Jews and Arabs alike would need to be guaranteed by international force—though a legitimately constituted binational state would find it much easier policing militants of all kinds inside its borders than when they are free to infiltrate them from outside and can appeal to an angry, excluded constituency on both sides of the border. A binational state in the Middle East would require the emergence, among Jews and Arabs alike, of a new political class. The very idea is an unpromising mix of realism and utopia, hardly an auspicious place to begin. But the alternatives are far, far worse.
Notes

[1] See Burg's essay, "La révolution sioniste est morte," Le Monde, September 11, 2003. A former head of the Jewish Agency, the writer was speaker of the Knesset, Israel's Parliament, between 1999 and 2003 and is currently a Labor Party member of the Knesset. His essay first appeared in the Israeli daily Yediot Aharonot; it has been widely republished, notably in the Forward (August 29, 2003) and the London Guardian (September 15, 2003).


[3] In 1979, following the peace agreement with Anwar Sadat, Prime Minister Begin and Defense Minister Sharon did indeed instruct the army to close down Jewish settlements in the territory belonging to Egypt. The angry resistance of some of the settlers was overcome with force, though no one was killed. But then the army was facing three thousand extremists, not a quarter of a million, and the land in question was the Sinai Desert, not "biblical Samaria and Judea."

[4] Albanians in Italy, Arabs and black Africans in France, Asians in England all continue to encounter hostility. A minority of voters in France, or Belgium, or even Denmark and Norway, support political parties whose hostility to "immigration" is sometimes their only platform. But compared with thirty years ago, Europe is a multicolored patchwork of equal citizens, and that, without question, is the shape of its future.

[5] As Burg notes, Israel's current policies are the terrorists' best recruiting tool: "We are indifferent to the fate of Palestinian children, hungry and humiliated; so why are we surprised when they blow us up in our restaurants? Even if we killed 1000 terrorists a day it would change nothing." See Burg, "La révolution sioniste est morte."