

Israel's 'national suicide'



Monday, January 16, 2012

From time to time, the Palestine Center distributes articles it believes will enhance understanding of the Palestinian political reality. The following article by Mark LeVine was published by AlJazeera.com on 16 January 2012.

"Israel's 'national suicide'"

By Mark LeVine

Say what you will about Israel's High Court of Justice, it knows how to name a decision.

In titling last Wednesday's legal decision, upholding the controversial Citizenship Law that prevents Palestinian spouses of Israeli citizens from living in Israel "Human rights are not a prescription for national suicide", the court's majority well summed up the existential predicament Israel faces today - indeed, has always faced - as it attempts to be both Jewish and democratic.

"National suicide" is, of course, an incredibly loaded term in the Israeli context. In the historical shadow of the Holocaust, Chief Justice Asher Grunis's appellation immediately raised the spectre of an existential threat to the Jewish people, or nation (Am Yisrael), being posed by the mere possibility of Palestinian Arabs joining Israeli society through marriage.

Right-wing lawmakers such as National Union chairman Ya'acov Katz have declared that the law would protect Israel from "the threat of being flooded with two-to-three million Arabs from outside its borders". But such claims are utterly nonsensical. The true number, as Grunis and the five other Justices who joined the 6-5 majority surely know, would be in the low thousands.

So why would they argue that allowing Palestinian spouses to become Israeli, which as the decision's title clearly admits is a basic human right, constitutes an act of "national suicide" for Israeli Jews?

To answer this question, we need to consider other possible meanings of the national suicide claim. We could imagine that the justices believe that recognising such marriages would accelerate the already "dangerous" trend towards demographic equality between Jewish and Palestinian citizens,

based on higher fertility rates among Palestinians.

The only problem with this oft-repeated claim is that it's false; the growth rate among the Palestinian population of Israel has actually slowed in the past decade, while those of religious Jews has exploded.

The true meaning of human rights

Simply put, the threat of a Palestinian "demographic bomb", as Prime Minister Netanyahu has called it, is little more than a contrivance to justify the further exclusion of Palestinians from full citizenship rights within Israel.

But accurate or not, the average Jewish Israeli is likely not spending much time parsing the logic or statistical foundations of the High Court's decision - because they understand the deeper meaning of the argument underlying the decision's title: to extend full human rights to Palestinians will lead inevitably to the "national" - that is, political - suicide of Israel as a Jewish state.

Why?

Because to recognise that Jews and Palestinians can become one in the most intimate way possible - through love, sex and children - is to open Israeli Jews to the possibility that there is nothing essential that separates them from Palestinians, that as human beings with deep roots in this land, Palestinians have the same human rights as Israeli (or diaspora) Jews.

Once people accept this reality, Zionism - which, at its core, is based on the exclusive Jewish claim of rights to and sovereignty over the Land of Israel - loses whatever remains of its moral and political legitimacy.

Such a recognition, then, would spell the death knell, not of Israeli Jews as people, but of Zionism as a viable political ideology.

Indeed, the High Court's decision reveals the paradox at the heart of Israel's political foundations - that its very claim to be both democratic and Jewish has always been a lie, because no state which privileges, through law, power and policies, one group over others simply because of the most basic identity (religion, ethnicity or gender, for example) of its members, can be democratic in any meaningful sense of the term.

And so, with all the sadness and regret that such an occasion deserves, Justice Grunis declares that "a small group - those men and women in Israel's Arab minority who want to marry residents of the region - must pay

a heavy price for greater security for all Israelis, including their own".

This language is crucial for two reasons: first, its unquestionable racism reveals the cancer at the heart of contemporary Israeli political ideology - not among the hilltop settler youth attacking Palestinian shepherds or the haredim who spit on pre-teen Jewish girls - but at the very heart of Israel's political and juridical establishment.

If the highest judge of Israel's highest court can stoop to such a decision, then Israel is not heading "down the slope of apartheid", as Haaretz editorialised in criticising the decision - it's already there. And the chances of it climbing out are slim indeed.

Second, the language reveals Justice Grunis' understanding that, thanks in good measure to the past six decades of Israeli policy, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (not to mention the majority of Palestinian refugees) are citizens of nowhere. They are merely "residents" of "regions" whose future is still in dispute; a purgatory which Israeli courts have played a major role in sustaining through innumerable decisions that have legalised and institutionalised - at least as far as the Israeli state is concerned - occupation, settlement, expropriation of land and resources and the stripping of basic human rights from Palestinians, on both sides of the Green Line.

Apartness to apartheid

This "apart-ness" from Israeli Jews and the full benefits of citizenship that accrue only to them, is of course the core principle of apartheid as a political and territorial system. And it is the "heavy price" that must be paid "for greater security for all Israelis, including their own".

"Their", of course, refers only to Israeli Jews - not their Palestinian fellow citizens.

The indigenous population as the ultimate "other" against which a national identity must be forcibly constructed is a basic trope of almost every national identity that has emerged on the soil of a conquered people. In Israel's case it goes back not merely to the beginning of Zionism, but to the construction of the earliest Hebrew/Israelite identity in the biblical era, as recounted in the Hebrew scriptures.

In *Before Israel: The Canaanites as Other in Biblical Tradition*, one of the most underutilised articles on the deep history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Robert L Cohn argues that there are two primary origin myths

through which ancient Israelites understood their interactions with the native Canaanite population of the land they believed to have been promised and given to them by God.

The more well-known narrative, which he terms the conquest and settlement arche (origin myth), is located primarily in the Books of Joshua and Judges. In it, the Canaanites are depicted as the dangerous "other" who exist both before and within the People of Israel. To justify their dispossession by the People of Israel, they were described as "horrendous sinners" and "defilers" of the land; a belief that had to be constantly reinforced since the Canaanites were not merely continuing to live among Israelites, but were sharing their most intimate practices - from sex to worship - with them.

Indeed, the cultural and linguistic overlap between Canaanite and Israelite societies meant that Israelite religious and political leaders had to spend significant energy to ensure that the members of the tribes who defined themselves through their exclusive worship of only one God kept themselves apart from their polytheistic (or at least more theologically syncretistic) neighbours.

At the same time, they had to discourage any attempt to see or treat Canaanites as part of the Israelite community, or even as a legitimate presence in the land the Israelite tribes believed had been given to them by God.

What is interesting is that there is another, earlier, arche surrounding the Canaanites, this one from the Book of Genesis. In these earliest descriptions of Canaanites, they are not yet a conquered people, but rather the legitimate masters of their land. God's promise to Abram - he had not yet become "Abraham" by entering into a direct covenant with God - was to give the land to him and his descendants in the future, after generations of suffering and servitude at the hands of others.

For the moment, as Cohn points out, Abram and his family were "the aliens, the wanderers, the endangered", while Canaanites the legitimate occupants of the land.

This is one of the most powerful, yet disheartening insights of the Bible: that without power, without sovereignty and a state or government that can wield violence over others, people becomes aliens in their own land, or even worse, wanderers outside the bounds or protection of any political community. In short, "Palestinian", which is the best contemporary description for the existence of Jews during their almost 2,000 years of exile between the destruction of the Second Temple in 70CE and the creation of

the State of Israel in 1948.

The price of conquest

With the conquest of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967 and the initiation of the settlement project by Jews in the Occupied Territories, Israelis were faced with a similar problem to that faced by their Israelite ancestors: how to keep the conquered population from corrupting and weakening the still fragile national identity while exploiting the people, territory and resources for the benefit of the core community?

The deeper and more entrenched the occupation became in the decades after 1967, the more integrated Palestinians became into Israeli society, and thus the more of a threat they constitute to the "national" existence of Israel as a Jewish, yet ostensibly democratic state.

Oslo was supposed to solve this problem by creating two ethnically and territorially differentiated states. But the peace process and its policy of "integration through separation" could neither slow down the continued territorial integration of the West Bank with Israel, nor offer the kind of globalised cosmopolitan identity that would overcome and heal the divisions and imbalances in power and rights between the two communities.

And so Chief Justice Grunis is right when he warns that Israel is headed for "national suicide" if it grants Palestinians the human rights they deserve; not physically, but as a viable polity.

The main question is whether, in an even more dystopian version of Thelma and Louise, Israel will take Palestine with it over the ledge - and whether Palestinian national identity imagined as a mirror image of an exclusive Zionist Israeli identity has become so weakened and corrupted through a century of conflict and occupation that it has neither the political nor ideological power to bring independence and justice to Palestinians.

Not suicide, but reinvention

The irony that Justice Grunis fails to note is that the only way for Israel to avoid suicide is precisely to respect and protect fully the human rights of everyone living in historic Palestine/Eretz Yisrael, without exception. It is only through a reinvention of Israeli national and political identity based on an open and holistic vision that Israelis Jews can ensure they retain their fundamental rights, as the country inevitably evolves away from a two-state system and towards a common, if conflicted, existence.

This is, not surprisingly, the same dilemma facing Israel's Arab neighbours. But with the exception of Tunisia, which is just now celebrating the first anniversary of Ben Ali's flight from the country, no governing elite has been willing to allow the real empowerment of their citizens through a real democratic process that is grounded in respect for the fundamental human rights of all citizens.

Whether in Tel Aviv, Cairo, Manama, Sanaa or Damascus, oppressive governments deploying chauvinistic identities that set neighbours against each other might survive in the near term. But the very ideology and tactics deployed to preserve them will ultimately cost the regimes, and the communities they claim to be protecting, their futures.

In choosing power over human rights, Israel is merely leading the way towards a future that has no place for Zionism or the region's other repressive and chauvinistic political systems and identities, against which millions of citizens across the Arab world have rebelled in the last year.

Indeed, if the new year is anything like the one just past, the coming Arab Spring will see more and more of the supposed beneficiaries of the status quo reaching out beyond their narrow interests to begin the hard work of constructing a common future.

This will be the lasting legacy of the still inchoate revolutions of the last year, and it's a future that not only Arabs and Israelis, but the world, has a powerful stake in helping to build.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of The Jerusalem Fund.