

Incitement Against Palestine - Prioritising of Israelis' Security Over Palestinians' Freedom

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US Secretary of State John Kerry spent last week testing the waters with Israelis and Palestinians over his so-called framework agreement – designed to close the gaps between the two sides. But the issues he is trying to resolve appear more intractable by the day.

As he headed to the region, Israel's hawkish cabinet ministers gave their blessing to legislation to annex the Jordan Valley, a large swath of the West Bank that might otherwise be the Palestinian state's economic backbone and gateway to the outside world.

To underscore their point, the interior minister, Gideon Saar, a close friend of prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, led a group of rightwing politicians on a tour of the valley during which they held a dedication ceremony for a new settlement neighbourhood.

In a speech there, the deputy foreign minister, Zeev Elkin, averred that the Jordan Valley must remain under "Israeli sovereignty forever". Without it, Israel would return to what he called the "Auschwitz borders" before the 1967 occupation began.

On Sunday, as Kerry left, the defence minister, Moshe Yaalon, added a new condition: peace was impossible, he argued, as long as the Palestinians and their schoolbooks "incited" against Israel, even quoting from a government-compiled "Palestinian incitement index".

The hyperbole overshadowed two Israeli surveys that might one day provide a yardstick by which to judge an equivalent "Israeli incitement index".

An opinion poll revealed that nearly two-thirds of Israeli Jews believe the conflict's Palestinian narrative – including the nakba, the great dispossession of the Palestinians in 1948 to create Israel – should be taught in schools.

This flies in the face of Netanyahu's own view. His government passed a law in 2011 effectively banning public institutions from giving a platform to nakba commemorations.

The other study, following an experiment in a handful of schools, demonstrated that, when Jewish students are exposed to spoken Arabic at an early age, between 10 and 12, they hold dramatically less hostile and stereotypical views of Arabs. Currently, many Jewish students never learn Arabic.

With the experimental programme employing teachers from Israel's large Palestinian minority, the study noted that for most of the Jewish children it was the first time they had developed a close relationship with an Arab.

The education ministry, however, was reported to have waved aside the findings and is apparently failing to fund the existing, small programme, let alone expand it.

This is no oversight. Successive Israeli governments have carefully engineered the structure of Israeli society to ensure that Jewish and Palestinian citizens, the latter comprising a fifth of the population, are kept in separate linguistic, cultural, educational and emotional worlds.

The reasoning is not hard to discern. The last thing Israeli leaders want is for Jewish and Palestinian citizens to develop shared interests, forge friendships and act in solidarity. That would start to erode the rationale for a Jewish state, especially one premised on the supposed need of the Jews to defend themselves from a hostile world – “the villa in the jungle”, as former prime minister Ehud Barak once characterised Israel.

In short, a Jewish state’s future precisely depends on the anti-Arab stereotypes inculcated in young Israeli minds.

It may not therefore be coincidental that, as Israel has faced increasing pressure over the past 20 years to make peace, the separation of Jews from Palestinians has entrenched.

Today most Israeli Jews rarely meet a Palestinian, and especially not one from the West Bank or Gaza. It is easy to forget that before the 1993 Oslo accords, many Israeli Jews regularly ventured into Palestinian areas, to shop, eat and fix their cars. Palestinians, meanwhile, were evident in Israeli communities, even if only as builders or waiters.

It may have been a very unequal, even colonial encounter, but nonetheless it made it hard for Israelis to demonise their neighbours.

Such contacts are now a distant memory. And that is precisely how leaders like Netanyahu want to keep it.

Inside Israel, the direction of policy is the same. In recent weeks, the government has insisted on raising the electoral threshold in a barely concealed effort to rid the parliament of Arab parties. Legislation is also being revived to tax into oblivion human rights organisations, those that give a voice to Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories.

Last weekend Avigdor Lieberman, the foreign minister, argued that a peace agreement must include disappearing hundreds of thousands of Palestinian citizens by transferring their homes to a future, very circumscribed Palestinian state.

Palestinian legislator Ahmed Tibi’s complaint that Palestinian citizens were viewed by Israel’s leaders as nothing more than “chess pieces” goes to the heart of the matter. It is easy to dehumanise those you know and care little about.

Israel’s separation policy – and its security justifications – requires not only that Jews and Palestinians be kept apart, but that Palestinians be confined to a series of discrete ghettos, whether in the West Bank, Jerusalem, Gaza or Israel.

These divisions are the cause of endless suffering. A recent study of Gaza, the most isolated of these ghettos, found that a third of Palestinians there were physically separated from a close relative. Israeli-imposed restrictions force Palestinians to forgo marriages, learn of relatives’ deaths from afar, miss college courses, and lose the chance for medical treatment.

The prioritising of Israelis' security over Palestinians' freedom was a central weakness of the Oslo process, and the same skewed agenda pollutes the current peace talks.

In a commentary for the Haaretz newspaper last week, a leading general, Gadi Shamni, set out at length the many military reasons – quite apart from political ones – why Israel could never risk allowing the Palestinians a viable state. On the army's best assessments, he argued, Israel would need to control such a state's borders and much of its territory, including the Jordan Valley, for a period ranging "from 40 years to forever".

The reality is that no arrangement on earth can guarantee protection for those in the villa from the beasts lurking outside. Either it is time to abandon the villa, or to start seeing the jungle as a forest to be explored.

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His new website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

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