

Israel's Triumph to Disaster

Who will stop Israel in its relentless expropriation of Palestine

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Who will stop Israel in its relentless expropriation of Palestine and from triumphing to disaster?

Isaac Deutscher, from whom I borrow my title, believed that the occupation of 1967 would have catastrophic consequences for Israel. It wouldn't end well, he feared.[1] Israel's expansion and colonial contempt would only produce more enemies, and its triumph would become its condition of defeat. Looking at Israel's daily aggressions in the West Bank and Gaza (and inside Israel itself, for that matter), Deutscher's warning can no longer be ignored today. If Israel has banked on its victory and has convinced itself that its position today is irreversible, then there's no guaranteeing that the Arabs it holds in so much contempt will always remain defeated and disorganized. No state can predict the future or preempt all human capacities and possibilities. The only thing that Israel can be sure of is that the more it brutalizes and kills and oppresses and strangulates Palestinians, the more Palestinians and other Arabs will be convinced that its future is bleak. Deutscher's warning should be on every Israeli and peace-loving minds today. What Israel does every day will simply not pass. The left is not in the business of advocating catastrophes. Deutscher's intention was the complete opposite in fact: he was trying to stop an impending disaster from happening. Like Walter Benjamin, he wanted "to activate the emergency brake" on the human race's moving train rather than watch it plunge into the abyss.[2] So Deutscher's warning should really be a question: who will stop Israel from triumphing to disaster? Who can end the insult, injury, and humiliations that Israel daily inflicts on Palestinians and Arabs through its occupation and bring freedom and justice closer? There are many false messiahs these days, and only one redemptive force. Let's begin with the false ones.

False Messiahs

The U.S. won't stop Israel, clearly. Not when Israel continues to play such a significant role in guaranteeing its regional interests (by crushing radicals and nationalists). And not when Israel continues to be the USA's most reliable and stable ally in this volatile region (the Israeli public actually wants closer U.S./Israel ties, unlike Turkey's or Saudi's or Egypt's or Jordan's public). Since Kissinger, the U.S. has done nothing but support Israel's deepening colonial expansion in occupied Palestine: diplomatic, financial, and military. For reasonable people, the U.S. is as much a problem for Palestinians as Israel is. For unreasonable ones, they look toward the U.S. for 'even-handedness' and 'brokering peace,' as if it hasn't already picked sides at least 40 years ago. Changing the U.S. relationship with Israel is changing U.S. interests in the region: there's no way round it. No begging, no beseeching, and no 'change we can believe in' will achieve that. Only real change: of politics and interests. The right question to pose is not whether the U.S. will put pressure on Israel. But:

how can we get the U.S. out of the Middle East? One million Arab dead in Iraq is one million too many. And five million internally and externally displaced is five million too many. Wars and occupations don't bring peace and security.

What about the Palestinian national movement? Can it stop Israel? The Palestinian Authority (PA) elite has basically co-opted Fatah politically and severely curtailed and diminished its field of independent political maneuver. Fatah has no strategy or plan to get Palestinians out of the current crisis.[3] [PA Chairman and Fatah leader] Mahmoud Abbas and [PA Prime Minister] Salam Fayyad's legitimacy in the eyes of the 'international community' (the U.S. and its EU backers) is the result of partnering with the occupation not ending it. There is, so to speak, no secular Palestinian national movement any longer. One elite figure after another in the PA competes in finding ways to 'develop,' 'build institutions,' and uplift Palestine without tackling the root cause of the problem for millions of Palestinians: the occupation regime itself.

Reality of Occupation

These fantasy schemes ignore hundreds of checkpoints and roadblocks, hundreds of kilometers of annexation Wall, hundreds of weekly Israeli army raids and arrests, 11 thousand Palestinian prisoners, and daily obstructions, humiliations, and reductions of human life. America actively supports this status quo, not only by injecting funds both directly and indirectly (through the EU and its Arab allies). But also militarily: by training Palestinian forces in terrorizing and torturing their own and crushing their will to resist (how can the PA honestly call for the boycott of Israeli settlement products when it daily does Israel's bidding in the West Bank?). Funds buy off elite complicity and security training and coordination with Israel crushes Hamas and Islamic Jihad and imprisons hundreds of their men and women every month. Every day Abbas and his dependents speak against a third intifada and obstruct mass rage against Israel. If the third intifada ever comes, it will have to face not only Israel's brutal army but its own internal Palestinian enemies as well: President Abbas and General Dayton's foreign-trained colonial enforcers.

To work against the occupation is, as the Israeli insult goes, 'to go to Gaza.' Gaza stands as a good example for the Palestinians in the West Bank of what democracy and resistance look like: siege, suffocation, mass unemployment, slow death, and collective punishment. And: mass killing and mass destruction, as the war on Gaza last year testifies. The U.S. and Israel have given Palestinians two options. You either collaborate in administering the occupation (and crush resistance and popular protest by force and terror) or you suffer the harsh consequences of armed struggle. Even Hamas has learnt this very costly lesson and is now actively preventing more radical jihadi groups from firing primitive Qassam rockets into Israel.

Will Hamas see Palestinians out of the occupation? The sober answer is: no it won't. It hasn't yet managed to lift Israel's cruel siege on Gaza, imprisoning 1.5 million Palestinians. Hamas is now in complete control of an imprisoned population which lacks basic human freedoms and rights of travel, employment, security, and education. It even adds Palestinian insult to Israeli injury by coercively enforcing hijab (as it tried to force it on women lawyers in court recently) and by prohibiting male hairdressers from cutting women's hair in Gaza. As if women's oppression is a requisite to Palestinian liberation! In addition, the political leverage Hamas has in the Arab world amounts to very little. Having adopted Fatah's nationalist policy of 'non-interference in Arab regimes,' Hamas finds itself (like its previous secular

predecessor) trying to secure Palestinian rights in an incredibly hostile Arab-regime environment; one which is not only dependent on the U.S. but is also allied with it against free democratic representation and Islamic radicalism.

Hamas beseeches Egypt to ease the siege and open Rafah, while Egypt uses its control of Rafah and the deep underground wall it is building, which will cut off Gaza's last remaining lifeline, in order to force Hamas to accept the U.S. conditions for Palestinian reconciliation (renouncing violence and recognizing previous agreements). Before reconciling with Fatah, Hamas needs, as far as the Egyptians are concerned, to become Fatah. So Hamas calls Palestinians in the West Bank out for a 'third intifada,' but to no visible effect. Palestinians come out, as this week, when Israeli provocation is completely intolerable or when they feel they can achieve something. After the defeat of two intifadas, Palestinians are understandably very wary of another intifada failing.

Redemptive Force

What Palestinians as a collective decide to do is ultimately the most important question. Only they can stop Israel. Most Palestinians are fed up with Palestinian political factionalism and PA corruption and subservience. They see no real way out through reconciliation or unity, though they still want it: the divisions seem too deep and the U.S. is too much of an obstacle. They also recognize that armed resistance has failed against one of the most powerful and brutal armies in the world. Israel unleashed itself on Gaza for 22 days as the world watched and did nothing. Why play the game of force when the balance of power is rigged against you to such a disproportionate extent?

The closest Palestinians got to challenging and undermining the Israeli occupation is in the unarmed mass resistance of the first intifada. This remains the most effective way to defeating Israel politically and to achieving Palestinian rights. It is hard to predict the future, but many believe that a popular uprising will eventually come. Will the coming rebellion be spontaneous and risk dissipating or will it be organized effectively, prioritizing mass self-mobilization over armed confrontation? Will the PA and Israel be able to crush it by force and coercion (by freezing the wages on which 140,000 PA employees and their families in the West Bank and Gaza depend), or will Israel finally succeed in pushing Palestinians toward civil war?

Not much is clear yet. But one thing is certain: international public opinion would welcome a mass Palestinian revolt. Voices for boycott and sanctions against Israeli apartheid would grow. Voices to lift the siege on Gaza would strengthen. And Israel would again confirm itself in popular world opinion as a pariah state. Will that cause a crack in its own flawed self-image? One hopes so. Will Israelis come to see themselves for what they really are: brutal, self-indulgent occupiers who are holding a whole people hostage? They may well do. There are certainly some beleaguered Israeli anti-occupation groups who are in desperate need for supporters and sympathizers. It would be nice to see them welcomed in the streets of Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv rather than harassed by the general public, arrested by the police, and generally bullied and humiliated.

If the Arab peoples move as well, and if their spontaneous support is organized and mobilized to greater effect, then the U.S. presence in the region can also be weakened. And that is no small thing. Arab hearts still lie in Palestine. It can still move a whole nation like no other cause in the region. Though the present looks bleak, collective acts of resistance can still create vast possibilities. •

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Notes

1. Isaac Deutscher, "[On the Israeli-Arab War](#)," New Left Review, 1/44 (July-August 1967), 30-45: "I am convinced that the latest, all-too-easy triumph of Israeli arms will be seen one day, in a not very remote future, to have been a disaster in the first instance for Israel itself" (30). And: "The Germans have summed up their own experience in the bitter phrase: 'Man kann sich totsiegen!' 'You can rush yourself victoriously into your grave.' This is what the Israelis have been doing. They have bitten off much more than they can swallow" (39).
2. Quoted in Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 66-7.
3. International Crisis Group, [Palestine: Salvaging Fatah](#), Middle East Report no. 91 (12 November 2009).

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