

The Decline of Israel

interview

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Global Research, March 13, 2010

[New Left Project](#) 10 March 2010

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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In a wide-ranging interview with the New Left Project, Nazareth-based journalist Jonathan Cook describes the increasingly repressive nature of Israeli society and the prospects for a solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict

NLP: What did you make of Ehud Barak's recent comparison of Israel to South Africa?

JC: We should be extremely wary of ascribing a leftwing agenda to senior Israeli politicians who make use of the word "apartheid" in the Israeli-Palestinian context. Barak was not claiming that Israel is an apartheid state when he addressed the high-powered delegates at the Herzliya conference last month; he was warning the Netanyahu government that its approach to the two-state solution was endangering Israel's legitimacy in the eyes of the world that would eventually lead to it being called an apartheid state. He was politicking. His goal was to intimidate Netanyahu into signing up to his, and the Israeli centre's, long-standing agenda of "unilateral separation": statehood imposed on the Palestinians as a series of bantustans (be sure, the irony is entirely lost on Barak and others). Barak knows that Netanyahu currently has no intention of creating any kind of Palestinian state, even a bogus one, despite his commitments to the US.

The last senior Israeli politician to talk of "apartheid" was Ehud Olmert, and it is worth remembering why he used the term. It was back in November 2003, when he was deputy prime minister and desperately trying to scare his boss, Ariel Sharon, into reversing his long-standing support for the settlements and adopt instead the disengagement plan for Gaza. Olmert's thinking was that by severing Gaza from the Greater Israel project - by pretending the occupation had ended there - Israel could buy a few more years before it faced a Palestinian majority and the danger of being compared to apartheid South Africa. It worked and Sharon became the improbable "man of peace" for which he is today remembered. (Strangely, Olmert, like Barak, defined apartheid in purely mathematical terms: Israeli rule over the Palestinians would only qualify as apartheid at the moment Jews became a numerical minority.)

Barak is playing a similar game with Netanyahu, this time trying to pressure him to separate from the main populated areas of the West Bank. It is not surprising the task has fallen to the Labor leader. The two other chief exponents of unilateral separation are out of the way: Olmert is standing trial and Tzipi Livni is in the wilderness of opposition. Barak is hoping to apply pressure from inside the government. Barak is eminently qualified for the job. He took on the mantle of the Oslo process after Yitzhak Rabin's assassination and then tried to engineer the final separation implicit in Oslo at Camp David in 2000 - on extremely advantageous terms for Israel.

Can he succeed in changing Netanyahu's mind? It seems unlikely.

NLP: Avi Shlaim recently described Tony Blair as 'Gaza's Great Betrayer'. What do you make of Tony Blair's role as Middle East peace envoy?

JC: Blair is a glorified salesman, selling the same snakeoil to different customers.

First, he is here to provide a façade of Western concern about mending the Middle East. He suggests that the West is committed to action even as it fails to intervene and the situation of the Palestinians generally, and those in Gaza in particular, deteriorates rapidly. He sells us the continuing dispossession of the Palestinians in a bottle labelled "peace".

He is also here as a sort of European proconsul to advise the Americans on how to repackage their policies. The US has become aware that it has lost all credibility with the rest of the world on this issue. Blair's job is to redesign the bottle labelled "US honest broker" so that we will be prepared to buy the product again.

His next task is to try to wheedle out of Israel any minor concession he can secure on behalf of the Palestinians and persuade Tel Aviv to cooperate in selling an empty bottle labelled "hope" as a breakthrough in the peace process.

And finally, he is here to create the impression that his chief task is to defend the interests of the Palestinians. To this end, he collects the three bottles, puts them in some pretty wrapping paper and writes on the label "Palestinian state".

For his labours he is being handsomely rewarded, especially by Israel.

NLP: You have described how Israel is becoming increasingly repressive regarding its own Arab population. In what ways?

JC: Let's be clear: Israel has always been "repressive" of its Palestinian minority. Its first two decades were marked by a very harsh military government for the Palestinian population inside Israel. Thousands of Bedouin, for example, were expelled from their homes in the Negev several years after Israel's establishment and forced into the Sinai. Israel's past should not be glorified.

What I have argued is that the direction taken by Israeli policy since the Oslo process began has been increasingly dangerous for the Palestinian minority. Before Oslo, Israel was chiefly interested in containing and controlling the minority. After Oslo, it has been trying to engineer a situation in which it can claim to no longer be responsible for the Palestinians inside Israel with formal citizenship.

This is intimately tied to Israel's more general policy of "unilateral separation" from the Palestinians under occupation: in Gaza, through the disengagement; in the West Bank, through the building of the wall. Israel's chief concern is that - post-separation, were Palestinian citizens to remain inside the Jewish state - they would have far greater legitimacy in demanding the same rights as Jews. Israelis regard that as an existential threat to their state: Palestinian citizens could use their power, for example, to demand a right of return for their relatives and thereby create a Palestinian majority. The problem for Israel is that Palestinian citizens can expose the sham of Israel's claims to being a democratic state.

So as part of its policy of separation, Israel has been thinking about how to get rid of the

Palestinian minority, or at the very least how to disenfranchise it in a way that appears democratic. It is a long game that I describe in detail in my book *Blood and Religion*.

Policymakers are considering different approaches, from physically expelling Israel's Palestinian citizens to the bantustans in the territories to stripping them incrementally of their remaining citizenship rights, in the hope that they will choose to leave. At the moment we are seeing the latter policy being pursued, but there are plenty of people in the government who want the former policy implemented when the political climate is right.

NLP: The frequent claim by Israeli officials is that Israel is a democracy and that Israeli Arabs are afforded the same rights as other citizens. What is your view?

JC: The widely shared assumption that Israel is a democracy is a strange one.

This is a democracy without defined borders, encompassing parts of a foreign territory, the West Bank, in which one ethnic / religious group - the Jewish settlers - has been given the vote while another - the Palestinians - has not. Those settlers, who are living outside the internationally recognised borders of Israel, actually put Benjamin Netanyahu and Avigdor Lieberman into power.

It is also a democracy that has transferred control over 13 per cent of its sovereign territory (and a large proportion of its inhabited land) to an external organisation, the Jewish National Fund, which prevents a significant proportion of Israel's own citizenry - the 20 per cent who are Palestinian - from having access to that land, again based on ethnic / religious criteria.

It is a democracy that historically gerrymandered its electoral constituency by expelling most of the indigenous population outside its borders - now referred to as the Palestinian refugees - to ensure a Jewish majority. It has continued to gerrymander its voting base by giving one ethnic group, Jews around the world, an automatic right to become citizens while denying that same right to another ethnic group, Palestinian Arabs.

This is a democracy that, despite a plethora of parties and the necessity of creating broad coalition governments, has consistently ensured that one set of parties (the Palestinian and anti-Zionist ones) has been excluded from government. In fact, Israel's "democracy" is not a competition between different visions of society, as you would expect, but a country driven by a single ideology called Zionism. In that sense, there has been one-party rule in Israel since its birth. All the many parties that have participated in government over the years have agreed on one thing: that Israel should be a state that gives privileges to citizens who belong to one ethnic group. Where there is disagreement, it is over narrow sectoral interests or over how to manage the details of the occupation - an issue related to territory outside Israel's borders.

Defenders of the idea that Israel is a democracy point to the country's universal suffrage. But that is hardly sufficient grounds for classing Israel as a democracy. Israel was also considered a democracy in the 1950s and early 1960s - before the occupation began - when a fifth of the populace, the Palestinian minority inside Israel, lived under a military government. Then as now, they had the vote but during that period they could not leave their villages without a permit from the authorities.

My point is that giving the vote to 20 per cent of the electorate that is Palestinian is no proof of democracy if Israeli Jews have rigged their "democracy" beforehand through ethnic

cleansing (the 1948 war); through discriminatory immigration policies (the Law of Return); and through the manipulation of borders to include the settlers while excluding the occupied Palestinians, even though both live in the same territory.

Israeli academics who consider these things have had to devise new classifications to cope with these strange features of the Israeli “democratic” landscape. The generous ones call it an “ethnic democracy”; the more critical ones an “ethnocracy”. Most are agreed, however, that it is not the liberal democracy of most Westerners’ imaginations.

NLP: You describe the long time anti-occupation activist and writer Uri Avnery as being a “compromised critic” of Israel. What do you mean by this? What is wrong with Avnery’s position on the occupation?

JC: There’s nothing wrong with Avnery’s position on the occupation. He wants to end it, and he has worked strenuously and bravely to do so over many decades.

The problem derives from our, his readers’, tendency to misunderstand his reasons for seeking an end to the occupation, and in that sense I think his role in the Palestinian solidarity movement has not been entirely helpful. Avnery wants the occupation to end but, it is clear from his writings, he is driven primarily by a desire to protect Israel as a Jewish state, the kind of ethnocratic state I have just described. Avnery does not hide this: he has always declared himself a proud Zionist. But in my view, his attachment to a state privileging Jews compromises his ability to critique the inherent logic of Zionism and to respond to Israel’s fast-moving policies on the ground, especially the goals of separation.

In a sense Avnery is stuck romantically in the 1970s and 1980s, the heyday of Palestinian resistance. Then the Palestinian struggle was much more straightforward: it was for national liberation. In those days Avnery’s battle was chiefly inside the Palestine Liberation Organisation, not inside Israel. He favoured a two-state solution when many in the PLO were promoting a vision of a single democratic state encompassing both Palestinians and Israelis. As we know, Avnery won that ideological battle: Arafat signed up to the two-state vision and eventually became the head of the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinian government-in-waiting.

But with Oslo, and formal Palestinian consent to the partition of historic Palestine, Avnery had to switch the focus of his struggle back to Israel, where there was much more resistance to the idea. While the Palestinian leaders were willing, even enthusiastic participants in the Oslo process, Israel’s leaders were much more cynical. They wanted a Palestinian dictatorship in the OPTs, led by Arafat, that would suppress all dissent while Israel would continue exploiting the land and water resources and the Palestinian labour-force through a series of industrial zones.

Because of his emotional investment in the separation policy of Oslo, Avnery has been very slow to appreciate Israel’s bad faith in this process. As the horrors of the wall and the massacres in Gaza have unfolded, I have started to see in his writings a very belated caution, a hesitation. That is to be welcomed. But I think looking to Avnery for guidance about where the Palestinian struggle against the occupation should head now – for instance, on the question of boycott, divestment and sanctions – is probably unwise. On other matters, he still has many fascinating insights to offer.

NLP: You are an advocate of a one state solution to the conflict. Given the overwhelming

opposition of most Israelis to such a solution how is this to come about?

JC: Let me make an initial qualification. I do not regard myself as being an “advocate” for any particular solution to the conflict. I would happily support a two-state solution if I thought it was possible. I do not have a view about which technical arrangement is needed for Palestinians and Israelis to live happy, secure lives. If that can be achieved in a two-state solution, then I am all in favour.

My support for one state follows from the fact that I have yet to see anyone making a convincing case for two states, given the current realities. Those in the progressive community who advocate for the two-state solution seem to do so because their knowledge of the conflict is based on understandings a decade or more out of date, and typically because they know little about what drives Israeli policies inside Israel’s internationally recognised borders – which is hardly surprising, given the dearth of reporting on the subject.

This relates to the question of how Israelis can be won over. If the criterion for deciding whether a solution is viable is whether it is acceptable to Israeli Jewish public opinion, then the two-state crowd have exactly the same problem as the one-state crowd. There is no popular backing in Israel for a full withdrawal to the 1967 borders; a connection between the West Bank and Gaza; open borders for the Palestinian state and the right for it to forge diplomatic alliances as it chooses; a Palestinian army and air force; Palestinian rights to their water resources; Jerusalem as Palestine’s capital; and so on. Almost no Israeli Jews would vote for a government advocating that solution.

When we hear of polls showing an Israeli majority for a two-state solution, that is not what the respondents are referring to: they mean a series of bantustans surrounded by Israeli territory and settlers; severe controls on Palestinian movement between those bantustans; Palestine’s capital in Abu Dis or some other village near Jerusalem; Israel’s continuing control of the water; no Palestinian army; and so on. The Israeli public’s vision of Palestine is the same as its leadership’s: an extension of the Gaza model to the West Bank.

So we might as well forget about pandering to Israeli public opinion for the moment. It will change when it is offered a different cost-benefit calculus for its continuing rule over the Palestinians, as occurred among white South Africans who were encouraged to turn against the apartheid regime. That is the purpose of campaigns like boycott, divestment and sanctions. Let’s think instead about workable solutions that accord with the rights of Israelis and Palestinians to live decent lives.

Interestingly, despite the mistaken assumption that Israelis favour a (real) two-state solution over a one-state solution, there are now indications that a broad coalition of Israelis accept that the moment for a two-state solution has passed. Meron Benvenisti, the former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, is one from the Zionist left. But surprisingly he was recently joined by Tzipi Hotovely, an influential MP from Netanyahu’s Likud party, who argues for granting citizenship to Palestinians in the West Bank.

NLP: Other writers such as Noam Chomsky and Norman Finkelstein argue in favour of a two-state solution, pointing out that world opinion and international law is firmly on the side of such a solution. How do you respond?

JC: Much as I respect Finkelstein and Chomsky, I find those arguments unconvincing.

“World opinion” in this case means little more than opinion in Washington, and as Chomsky has eloquently pointed out on many occasions the US, along with Israel, is the rejectionist party to the conflict. In fact, it is precisely because the US and Israel are the rejectionist camp that we should be wary of accepting that a two-state arrangement is a viable solution to the conflict now that the leaderships of both countries ostensibly support it.

Rather I would argue that the US and Israel pay lipserve to a two-state solution to provide cover for the emerging reality on the ground, in which Jewish privilege is being maintained in a unilaterally imposed one-state solution by Israel. Without that cover, the apartheid nature of the regime and the creeping programme of ethnic cleansing would be blindingly obvious to everyone.

Since Oslo, Barak, Sharon, Olmert and Livni all understood that “world opinion” could be kept at bay only as long as Israel appeared to favour a two-state solution. Netanyahu has embarrassed the West, and the US in particular, by dropping that pretence. It is why he is so unpopular and why we are starting to see more critical coverage of Israel in the media. Things are not worse, at least in the occupied territories, than they were under Olmert and co (in fact, it could be argued that they are moderately better), but it is much easier for journalists to cover some of the reality now. I guess this is a way of bringing Netanyahu into line.

The international law argument in this context is not much more helpful. While international law offers a discrete and invaluable set of principles when it comes to determining the rules of war, for instance, matters are not so straightforward when related to borders and territory.

Which bit of international law are we referring to? Why not take as our reference point the 1947 partition plan, which would see nearly half of historic Palestine returned to the Palestinians, and Jerusalem under international control? And what are we to make of UN Resolution 242, which refers to “the acquisition of territories” in the English version and “the acquisition of the territories” in the French version? Should the Palestinians be offered 28 per cent of their homeland or less than 28 per cent? And what do the Oslo accords mean in practice for Palestinian statehood, given that the final status issues were left open?

One can argue over these points endlessly, and dwelling on them to the exclusion of all other considerations is a recipe for helping the powerful in their struggle to ensure that the status quo – the occupation – is maintained.

The primary goals of international law are twofold: to safeguard the dignity of human beings; and to ensure their right to self-determination. In my view, those aims cannot be realised in a two-state solution, given both the realities on the ground and the conditions on Palestinian sovereignty being demanded by Israel and the international community.

Instead we should look to international law to provide a frame of reference for finding a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but it should not tie our hands. The objective is to find a practical and creative political arrangement that has legitimacy in the eyes of both parties and can ensure that Israelis and Palestinians lead happy, secure lives. The goal here is not a technical solution; it is an enduring peace.

NLP: British media coverage of the conflict is typically more sympathetic towards Israel than towards Palestinians and generally fails to give proper historical background to the conflict.

Why do you believe the British media behaves in this way regarding the conflict

JC: There are various reasons that are sometimes difficult to disentangle. For the sake of simplicity, I will separate them into three categories: practical issues facing journalists covering the conflict; expectations imposed by the supposed “professionalism” of journalism; and ideological and structural constraints that reflect the fact that the dominant journalism practised today is a journalism cowed by corporate interests.

Of the practical issues, one of the most important – though least spoken of, for obvious reasons – is the fact that foreign desks prefer to appoint Jewish reporters to cover the conflict. In part the preference for Jewish reporters reflects an assessment, and probably a correct one, by editors that Israel, not the Palestinians, makes the news and that Jewish reporters will fare better as they negotiate the corridors of power in a self-declared Jewish state. Faced with candidates for the job, a foreign editor will often take the easy choice of a Jew who speaks fluent Hebrew, has family here who will provide ready-made contacts, and has some sort of commitment to living here and gaining a deeper understanding of (Israeli) life. Of course, those are precisely the reasons why an editor ought to judge the reporter unsuitable, but in practice it does not work that way.

I know from my own experiences that most Israeli officials try to find out whether you are Jewish before they will build any kind of intimacy with you as a reporter. That works to the advantage of Jewish reporters when a job comes up in Jerusalem.

I should add that the historical tendency of the British media to appoint Jewish reporters has diminished in recent years, possibly because the desks have become more self-conscious about it. But it is still very strong among the American media, and it is the American media that set the news agenda on the conflict. The NYT’s Ethan Bronner is fairly typical on that score and the paper’s indulgent decision to allow him to continue in his posting after revelations of a clear conflict of interest – that his son has joined the Israeli army – simply highlights the point.

A second practical issue is the location of British bureaus: in Jewish West Jerusalem. That results in a natural identification with Israeli concerns. It would be just as easy, and cheaper, to locate journalists a short distance away in Ramallah, or even in a Palestinian neighbourhood of East Jerusalem, but few if any do so.

Then there are the local sources of information that a reporter relies on. He or she reads the Israeli media, most of which have English editions, and comes to understand the conflict through the analyses and commentaries of Israeli journalists. This is even more true for those reporters who read Hebrew. Are there any British journalists reading the Palestinian media in Arabic? I doubt it.

Similarly, Israeli spokespeople are much more likely to be sources of information: they usually speak English; they are accessible, especially if you are Jewish and seen as “sympathetic” to Israel; and they are authoritative from the point of view of the correspondents. By contrast, the Palestinians are in a much weaker position. Who counts as a Palestinian spokesperson? Usually reporters turn to the Palestinian Authority for comments, even though the PA’s agenda is severely compromised and Palestinian opinion is deeply divided. In addition, official Palestinian spokespeople are often hamstrung by a rigid bureaucracy, lack of accountability, problems of language, and little knowledge of the decisions being taken in Tel Aviv and West Jerusalem that shape their lives.

Issues deriving from journalism's so-called "professionalism" must be factored in too. The professional training of journalists encourages them to believe that there are objective criteria that define what counts as news. A consequence is that professional journalists are expected to follow similar lines of inquiry and turn to the same groups of "neutral" contacts. This justifies both the hunting-in-packs philosophy that underpins most mainstream journalism and the reliance on establishment sources whom journalists use to interpret the news story.

In the case of Israel-Palestine, we end up with very similar looking accounts of the conflict that are usually filtered through the perspectives of a narrow elite of politicians, academics and diplomats who share in the main fanciful assumptions about the conflict: that there is a meaningful peace process; that Israeli leaders are acting in good faith; that the occupation is unpleasant but temporary; that the Palestinians are their own worst enemies or genetically prone to terrorism; that the occupation in Gaza has ended; that the Americans are a neutral broker in the conflict; and so on.

"Balance" is also seen as an essential quality in any professional news report. Balance of the "Israel said-the Palestinians said" variety encourages a view that the two sides in the conflict are equal. It favours the status quo, which favours Israel because it is the dominant party.

Another issue that skews coverage is the fact that professional journalists are supposed to take directions in their coverage from senior editors, usually thousands of miles away. The mainstream media is very hierarchical and few journalists will risk engaging in repeated fights with senior editors if they wish to be successful. The problem is that those editors have formed their views of the conflict in part by reading influential columnists, particularly those in the US who are considered to be close to the centres of power. That means that Zionist commentators like Thomas Friedman and the late William Safire shape British editors' understanding of the region and therefore also the sort of coverage they expect from their reporters. Professional journalists do not usually invent things to satisfy their editors but they do steer clear of certain topics and lines of inquiry that conflict with their editors' assumptions.

This tendency is strongly reinforced by the pro-Israel lobby in Britain, which gives reporters and their editors a hard time whenever they depart from common, and usually erroneous, assumptions about Israel. The sheer weight of the lobby, both in terms of its leaders' connections to the British elites and its large number of foot soldiers, makes it very intimidating to the media. Minor matters of interpretation by a reporter can quickly be blown into a full-scale scandal of biased reporting or accusations of anti-Semitism. Even accurate reporting that is critical of Israel can be damaging to a journalist's reputation, as Jeremy Bowen found out last year when absurd complaints against him were upheld by the BBC Trust.

The effect of the lobby in Britain is further heightened by the far greater power of the pro-Israel lobby in the US. British editors, as we have already noted, look to US commentators for guidance about the conflict. So the US lobby, in shaping the views of the American media, also affects the British media's conceptions too.

These last problems are closely related to the much larger structural and ideological issues affecting modern journalism that direct the coverage of Israel-Palestine.

In my early career working for British newspapers, I was a very traditional liberal journalist. Only when I turned freelance, moved to the Middle East and started covering the Israel-Palestine conflict from a Palestinian city did I discover that most of my life-long assumptions about the liberal British media were untenable. It was a period of rapid and profound disillusionment. Out here, I was faced with a stark choice: report the conflict in the same distorted and misleading manner adopted by the mainstream reporters or become a so-called “dissident” journalist. I struggled with the first option for a while, publishing in the Guardian and the International Herald Tribune when I could, but it was with a heavy conscience. It was during this period that I heard about the propaganda model of Ed Hermann and Noam Chomsky, as well as websites like Media Lens, which finally made sense of my own experiences as a journalist.

The structural problem of modern journalism is a huge subject I cannot do more than outline here.

Professional journalism exists in its current state because it is subsidised by fabulously wealthy owners and fabulously wealthy advertisers, both of whom share the interests of the corporate elites that rule our societies. The corporate-owned media ensures its journalists share its corporate values through a process of “filtering”. Journalists who make it to a position like Jerusalem bureau chief, for example, have gone through a very lengthy selection process that weeds out anyone considered undesirable. Typically an undesirable journalist fails to abide by the implicit rules of the profession: she is not intimidated in the face of power and authority, she looks beyond the elites to other sources of information, she rejects the bogus idea of objectivity and neutrality, and so on. Such journalists either get stuck in lowly jobs or are pushed out.

The result is a sort of Darwinian natural selection that ensures corporate, clubbable journalists rise to the top and select in their image those who follow behind them.

Given this analysis of corporate journalism, it becomes much easier to understand why the media in the West, where financial, military and industrial interests prevail, should demonstrate a much greater sympathy for Israel’s concerns than the Palestinians’.

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This interview first appeared on the website of the New Left Project at: <http://newleftproject.org/>

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