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**Palestine**

# **After Gaza**

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**The removal of about 8,000 settlers from Gaza and from the four settlements in the north of the West Bank has been presented to the world as the beginning of a new era: the end, after 38 years, of the occupation of the Gaza strip. It has been put forward as a new, concrete step in the peace process, such a critical step for Israeli society that the latter finds itself in opposition to one of its own elements, the settlers; a political somersault for the unattractive political personality of Ariel Sharon, and best of all, the next test for the Palestinians, who as usual are cited as the real cause of the failures of attempts at agreement in the last twenty years.**

The chorus of approbation for the Israeli government has reached unprecedented levels, much as in 1993 with Rabin. The only voices outside this chorus have come from within Palestinian civil society and politics, whether in the diaspora or in Palestine, and, predominantly in this instance, from within Israeli civil society itself (rather than from within Israeli politics).

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/xxflagkids.jpg>]

The sigh of relief audible across the world on the eve of the evacuation seems to coincide with a sort of burial of this complicated matter.

But if everything is going so well in the Middle East, in terms of defusing the explosiveness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, if we are progressing towards a chapter of peace, how can some people be sceptical of the process?

Well, anyone not totally taken in by the propaganda can look at the process that has been initiated by the implementation of Sharon's plan and see it for what it is: the consolidation of the extension of the Zionist colonial project, which has as its aim the cantonisation of the West Bank, dividing it into Palestinian enclaves within Israeli territory, and the annexation of the rest of Palestinian territory to the state of Israel. In this scheme of things, Gaza has absolutely no importance, it is only being used as the justification which the Israeli establishment has used to carry out an old project first thought of many years ago.

## Retreat or rationalisation of the occupation?

The removal from Gaza is anything but a novelty. Ariel Sharon, then minister for settlements under Prime Minister Begin, had already drawn up the plan in 1979. In other words what is taking place now is an integral part of his strategy, the rest of which consists of building settlements stretching from the Mediterranean to the Jordan.

Moreover, as should be obvious, the removal of the settlements does not mean the end of the occupation of Palestine, only that of the Gaza Strip. Nothing has been said about a real withdrawal of the army, nothing about what is essential for the survival of the Palestinians in Gaza, which will be run by the Palestinian National Authority; and nothing about Israel's frontier with Egypt, the customs posts, the transfer of individuals, whether into Israel or Egypt, or the control of water resources.

This silence on Israel's role in Gaza since the disengagement means, in other words, that unless there is an agreement with the Palestinians over the Israeli conditions, all the lines along which this area develops will continue to be determined by Israeli legislation, with predictable consequences.

Carrying out the project of unilateral withdrawal which as such is not negotiable, and which cannot be controlled jointly with any other parties -whether the Palestinians or other international forces - is the final phase as far as Israel is concerned, stamped on every other possible process of dialogue and compromise with the Palestinians. Is saying this an expression of extreme pessimism? No, just of the brutal reality.

There will be no reconsideration, even in theory, or any calling into question as a result of this project, of the plans to consolidate the settlement of the rest of Palestine, starting from East Jerusalem and its suburbs. Already on the day after the removal of the settlements from Gaza the extension of the settlement of Maale Adumin was recommenced, in fact joining East Jerusalem into one with the already existing settlements.

But this is not all. The project being carried out today in Israel fits perfectly into a strategy which is basically that of not giving up on the plan for Transfer of the Palestinians to Jordan, where since they would be the majority, they would be free to destroy the Hashemite monarchy in order to create a Palestinian state for themselves. This is a very old strategy, but it has one fault, or, expressed in the discourse prevalent amongst the Israeli political class, will meet a certain obstacle: how to make the Palestinians accept mass transfers? Decades of resistance have shown that they have no intention of abandoning their land. To carry out this project, which goes back in an unbroken line from Ben Gurion to Sharon, the international context has to be such that there can be agreement to ethnic cleansing on a vast scale, even worse than that which led, between 1947 and 1949, to the expulsion of 800,000 Palestinians.

As events have unfolded since September 11, 2001, the international context has already allowed Israel to achieve many objectives, above all the delegitimisation of all forms of armed struggle and resistance to military occupation, which has subsumed the official designation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into the more general term of "worldwide pre-emptive war against terror". This is not a minor point in the analysis, but the basis on which an important fact rests: from September-October 2001 until today, including the withdrawal from Gaza, the agendas of western imperialism, especially that of US imperialism, and that of Israeli imperialism, have increasingly coincided with one another. But those agendas are not identical, and even if there is not the slightest friction within this imperfect identity of interests, and even if it is not in contradiction with the one-sided support offered the Israeli state, still it does not guarantee the total impunity of Israel if the latter were forced to choose generalised violent expulsions, which would inevitably be accompanied by large massacres.

One of Sharon's characteristics, as of many Israeli leaders, is always to have two plans, linked as far as possible, but slightly different, in order to be able to make the maximum gains even if the whole project cannot be carried out. The Separation Wall, and the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and from the four colonies in the north of the West Bank, are all the focus of the backup plan which for the moment will be satisfied by settling and annexing more than thirty percent of the West Bank, keeping them out of the most densely populated Palestinian zone.

According to Israeli intentions, this will make it possible to write the epitaph on Palestinian aspirations for an independent state on the 22 percent of historic Palestine represented by the territories occupied in the 1967 war.

## Frontline Palestinians in retreat

The Palestinians living in Gaza will certainly breathe a sigh of relief when the settlers and the army finally leave, but they will still remain shut in an immense prison, surrounded on every side and at the mercy of arbitrary Israeli power. The Palestinians of Gaza will not be free, from today onwards, to move freely anywhere outside the Gaza Strip. This means that as before, all forms of economic activity will be dependent on Israeli permission. For example, the torment endured by the workers who commute (most of the Palestinian labour force of Gaza) is not over, and in fact will probably get worse. Actually for many years, since the outbreak of the first Intifada in 1987, Israel has

implemented a policy of substitution for the Palestinian workforce, using migrants from other countries. So in reality Israel has an ever decreasing interest in workers from Gaza being able to enter the country.

Without a shadow of doubt the period ahead is a very difficult and complex one both for the Palestinian National Authority and for the Palestinian population.

The difficulties come from various directions, above all from the fact that in Gaza in particular Israeli repression has struck fiercely, practically decapitating all political leadership, whether of the Palestinian National Authority or of the Islamic organisations, or above all, of the secular and progressive political opposition. This more than anything that today in reality the political class in Gaza is out of control. Is there the risk in Gaza of a Somalia-type situation? As we do not have a crystal ball we cannot give a definite answer, and we certainly are not predicting it.

What we can say, as it is vouched for by the history of the resistance of the Palestinian people both in and outside Gaza and in the West Bank, is that they have shown a surprising collective political ability to reflect and to mobilise around their own national objectives, even in the worst periods - of which the present is clearly one. The assassination of Musa Arafat (cousin of Yasser Arafat and former head of internal security for Gaza), and the brief but bizarre abduction of Lorenzo Cremonesi (correspondent for the Italian newspaper "Corriere della Sera") are episodes that have

Amongst the things that have emerged in these years of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, which broke out in 2000, is that the contest is not one between the PNA and Hamas. In this sense the real test of the Palestinians is not how far they are able to shake the Israelis' complex plans (which could even provide for the dismantling of other West Bank settlements if that turned out to be useful), but what capacity the PNA and the other political, social and cultural forces will have to head a movement that will not just accede to a tactical rearrangement of the occupation but will once and for all throw into crisis the instruments that the Israeli state possesses besides the Wall. As Bashir Abu Manneh, a Palestinian intellectual who lives in New York, observed:

"In this way Sharon has obtained a fourfold result from the Plan for Dispossession: to deny the rights of the Palestinians as well as refuse any real dialogue with the Palestinian Authority that was born out of the Oslo process; to control dissent and the process of internal fragmentation; to push aside international diplomacy; and to relaunch the image of Israel as a strong, cohesive and proactive state, and to weaken the pressure on the state and on Israeli society from the messianic wing of Zionism.

This is another problem for the Palestinians, as their internal debate shows clearly: it seems that Sharon's results could be turned to their favour and that this would happen above all via a reconstruction of the forms of struggle and social and political reorganisation in order to face the new situation. But the risk is that the withdrawal from Gaza would turn itself into a worse trap than the illusions occasioned by Oslo.

Another challenge for the Palestinians, definitely posed more sharply now than in the preceding years, is to engage in a dialogue with Israeli society, essentially in order to profit from its contradictions.

## Israeli society and the settlers

The contradictions within Israeli society are numerous and some of the most disenchanted Israeli Jews have for some time been sounding the alarm about their sharpening. Some, without putting a date to it, are talking of an urge towards suicide, and denounce what they call the "Masada syndrome", of a society which is searching for normality,

and wishes to be normal, but is not, and cannot become so until it finds a balance in its relations with the Palestinians, whose population it holds under military occupation and which it represses socially, politically and culturally, exploits economically, and whose land it expropriates.

It should be said clearly that these contradictions cannot be seen as the result of the removal of the Gaza settlements. They had already been weighing heavily upon Israeli society, not because the majority of Israelis had started to discuss the concept of the settlements on which their existence as a state depends, but because of the resistance of the Palestinians of Gaza, their remaining after the air raids and not fleeing, after the demolition of thousands of houses, the uprooting of thousands of fruit trees, olive trees, and the destruction of hectare after hectare of cultivated land had forced home the message that military tactics do not pay.

None of this gainsays the fact that the army needed many thousands of soldiers to defend the 7,500 settlers of Gaza, and that these soldiers had started to ask themselves "Why are we doing this?", understanding at a very basic level that the equation "occupation equals security" does not work. In some cases, not many, but significant ones, soldiers from units deployed in Gaza have denounced their own brutality and the fact that they had been obliged to follow orders that were completely ridiculous and cruel. They used to find that the best way to stop children from going to school across a piece of land that had been shut by military order was to fire their own machine guns using remote control targeting.... many dozens of Palestinian children have been killed because a commander bored with hours of guard duty would point a gun at them and invoke "the need for security in the face of kamikaze attackers".

They were often exercised by attempts to foresee violent actions on the part of the settlers who would be "obliged to abandon their own homes that they had built", on other people's land, razing to the ground the houses of another people....

When the moment for evacuation came, the army was sent against unarmed settlers, and were ordered not to use violence: "Remember that they are your brothers...", completely hypocritical words from a leadership that without ever striking a blow itself has for decades ordered massacres, expulsions, and mass round ups of defenceless and unarmed people. Only fools would believe in a change of spots on the part of the army that embraced those same fierce settlers who, assembled in the synagogue of Neve Dekalim, had greeted them (literally) with vitriol.

These embraces between brothers were the nth blow for those of the Israeli soldiers who are familiar - when things are going OK - only with the butt ends of rifles, and with incomprehensible shouting in the strange jargon of the occupiers, which is not intended to be understood by Israelis, let alone by Palestinians.

Even this was an integral part of the grand theatrics, aimed less at a domestic than at an external audience. The aim was to show that in the last analysis, while Israel "the only democracy in the Middle East" can succeed in managing such a vital transition by means of song, collective prayer, and only a few insults, albeit strong ones, on the other side are the barbarians, whom they shoot at. How much contempt and racism is hidden in the words: "A Jew does not expel another Jew" [settlers' slogan]. This means believing in genetic superiority, the sovereignty of a people of bosses in the name of God. But it was a Jew that assassinated a Jewish prime minister, was it not?

These are not the words of a Palestinian but of an Israeli called Avraham Burg, a religious Jew, former Labour president of the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) and of the worldwide Jewish Agency. They were published in "Haaretz", the most important Israeli paper, on 18 August.

Referring to the much heralded meeting between secular Israelis and religious nationalists, Burg continues:

"When the settlers threaten me with a "fratricidal war" I say "Stop!" Are these people my brothers? No! My only

biological siblings are my two sisters. I have brothers and sisters who share values and the same spirit with me. But a wicked man, a whining oppressor or an occupier armed to the teeth are not my brother, even if they keep Shabbat and all the other religious rules. And if a woman wears a scarf to show that she is pious, but with the head underneath the scarf regards "Jewish soil" as more sacred than human life, she is not my sister but my enemy".

Avraham Burg's words clarify several things.

One of the most widespread and durable stereotypes is the one that sees Israeli society and Israeli Jews in their vast majority as cohesive, socially, politically and culturally homogeneous, straining to build an ethnically homogeneous state in the name of Zionism, religion and the myth of security.

What has emerged in the last twenty years on the contrary shows that Israeli society is quite a varied and complex phenomenon. It is not possible to go into this aspect of the subject in as much detail as it deserves in this article.

But it can be said without any doubt that for some time Israeli society has been on the verge of an internal collision. It is no great novelty when a Jew kills another Jew - the history of the construction of the state of Israel is littered with episodes of this sort.

The crisis is a deep one, and also bears on the discovery that it is not the Palestinians, who are ready for compromise, as shown by the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993 and after, who initiated a civil and cultural (rather than a social and political) war.

After the failure of all the agreements, the Israeli political leadership is trying to resurrect the old myths. When Ehud Barak said in 2000-2001 that "We shall be a villa in the heart of the jungle", he was attempting to totally absorb the blows of the preceding period.

The villa is modernity, comfort, civilisation, culture. The jungle is barbarism. The jungle is by definition a rogue state. "We live in the heart of the jungle" means to be able to survive inside the Arab world, and also inside the Muslim world, it means that what surrounds us is an immense sea of barbarism while we are the only place that is civilised in the jungle, that we are threatened by barbarism. So, as we are a villa in the jungle we are allowed to do anything. When you are confronting the jungle, it is not possible to engage in negotiations or dialogue. Coexistence does not exist because the jungle will invade us, it is permanently in action with the aim of choking the villa. For those who are permanently at war, a general preventive war is needed against this jungle so that the villa is not choked.

These words below too are not the words of a Palestinian, but of an Israeli Jew, in every way a son of the diaspora and of post 1967 Israeli society, Michel Warshawski, who says bitterly of his own society:

"The violence that has been put in train in the last four and a half years in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank is literally unprecedented in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is not just a quantitative difference but also a qualitative one. It is a violence that dehumanises the enemy. In the eyes of the Israeli soldiers, young men of 18 or 19, they are no longer men, women, children, old people, but a terrorist threat that must be rooted out (...) What has become the code for how to behave or how not to behave towards the Palestinians is little by little becoming the code for how to behave inside [Israeli society]. It is becoming a brutal, vulgar society, a society in which every idea of civilised living is disappearing.

It may be asked: "What does this have to do with the unilateral withdrawal?" It is, together with the international situation described above, the element which has allowed this process to be carried out.

In this brief analysis which began with the removal of the settlers from the Gaza Strip, we have tried to go beyond the common positions which make the present more acceptable but make it impossible to face the future. In this sense it is clear that neither crisis, that of Israeli society or that of the Palestinians, can be resolved by the unilateral removal of the settlements. Many scenarios can be envisaged for the future, some of them completely negative ones, but all of them more or less possible.

Ariel Sharon's declarations, on the day after his speech at the UN meeting, in which he threatened to block the Palestinian elections, planned to take place in January 2006, if Hamas puts forward candidates, shows even more clearly if possible, that it is in Israel's interest for there to be a total implosion of Palestinian society. The Palestinian sociologist Jawad, from Bir Zeit University, speaks of sociocide. An ugly neologism, but one which does however make the terms of the matter clear: the question is whether Israel's interest lies principally in the destruction of every possibility, present or future, of political, social, economic and cultural organisation by the Palestinian people.

In this sense, the Palestinians are facing a great challenge, to face their own internal crisis without following the path to which Israel wants to confine them: either civil war or collaboration; but to experiment in the very near future with a strong movement to democratise their own structures, both in Gaza and in the West Bank. This is the only antidote to chaos and corruption.

To develop the social and political dialectic is not a luxury but an unavoidable necessity for the Palestinians at this moment.