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Palestine/Israel

State, civil society and army in Israel

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Since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 the Jewish population has always been defined by military service. The Israeli citizen was ultimately there to serve the state in its war against the Arab world. This definition of citizenship marginalized both the Palestinian Arabs and the orthodox Jews, neither of who serve in the army.

The Palestinians were further exempt from the civic life of the state for ethnic reasons. In this ethnic/militaristic context an image has been created of the citizen who serves without protesting against national objectives and whose rights are defined by the very act of service. These include the right to education, health and social welfare.

For this system to be viable, it was necessary as far as the state was concerned for a war to be unavoidable (at least in the eyes of public opinion) and that its objectives should be clear.

The war in Lebanon broke the agreement between the state, civil society and the army creating a social and political division in Israeli society that persists to this day. One of the main characteristics of the war was that its objectives were never really explained to public opinion or indeed to the Israeli government by its perpetrators - Ariel Sharon, Rafael Eitan and Menachem Begin.

The official reason given by the Israeli government justifying the invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 was the creation of a cordon sanitaire within Lebanese territory. This was merely an excuse. Even minor officials knew that the invasion would not stop there. It was only after the Battle of Beirut when the PLO leadership had retreated to Tunisia and the goals of the invasion seemed to have been achieved that the initially given reasons changed. Having occupied Beirut Israel now intended to impose pro-Israeli government in Lebanon - that of the Falangist leadership of Bashir Gemayel which signed a peace treaty with Tel Aviv. Gemayel's subsequent assassination however undermined this strategy. As a consequence of that event, the Falange carried out the massacres in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Chatilla during which Israeli troops sealed the entrances and exits to the camps thus impeding the escape of the residents.

The invasion of Lebanon was therefore central to the socio-political and cultural changes which took place in Israeli society in the 1980s and 1990s and to those changes that occurred in relations between Israel and the Palestinian people in particular. Furthermore, the position held in Israeli society by the army was devalued.

The Palestinian intifada of 1987-91 can also be seen as a further consequence. Up until 1982, the presence of Israeli occupation forces in the West Bank and Gaza Strip prevented the development of a political opposition to Israeli occupation. Palestinian national leaders who had some public profile were arrested and often deported whether involved with armed struggle or not. This repression, part of the Israeli line of the "struggle against terror" was particularly effective against unarmed political forces and paradoxically created a vacuum where armed struggle became the only means of expression for the Palestinian national movement. This armed struggle was mainly directed by the PLO outside Palestine sometimes by means of orders to organizations within Palestine and at other times by means of attacks from Lebanon and Jordan.

The war in Lebanon also had consequences such as the reduction in numbers of effective military personnel in the West Bank and Gaza which allowed for the development of a Palestinian civil society which did not receive direct orders from Tunis as it had more urgent and immediate problems of its own to deal with. This incipient civil society was formed by popular organizations, human rights groups, trade unions and student organizations and so on five years before the outbreak of the intifada.

It can be said therefore that the intifada was as much a response to the political and military institutions of the Israeli state as it was a repercussion of the war in Lebanon.

The peace movement and the protest against military policy in Israel emerged as a consequence of the trauma of the war of October 1973. Until then, the Israeli population had total confidence in the government, the army and the policy of military security. In the 25 years of the state's existence this policy had led to three wars (1948, 1956 and 1967) which not only demonstrated Israel's military superiority over her neighbours but also added territories under Israeli control. This was not the case in 1973 when the armies of Egypt and Syria surprised the Israelis with a joint attack in which they recaptured territories occupied in 1967. During the counter attack, Israel managed to cross the Suez Canal but they were unable to retake all the land recovered by Syria and Egypt.

The so-called "Yom Kippur trauma" was caused by the element of surprise in the Arab assault together with the large number of dead or injured in battle.

After the war, demobilized Israeli soldiers demonstrated against "the irresponsible policies of the Golda Meir government". This movement never criticized the Israeli military system but rather the political direction of a state which had failed to foresee or prepare itself for war. The movement demanded that the government instigate a judicial inquiry. One which found the military leadership guilty for the fiasco but absolved the politicians.

One of the chief political consequences of the 1973 war was the loss of power of the Labour Party which had held power in Israel since the foundation of the state. The government fell after a split within the party and the subsequent administration was formed by the Likud bloc. This was a major trauma for Labour which had not only led Israel's political direction but was identified with the state itself. The army, security services, trade unions and industry organized within the Histadut and the academic community was in one form or another maintained under their hegemony. For the ruling class, above all its bureaucratic leadership, the electoral defeat was almost on a par with the loss of the state itself.

With Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977, the Israeli-Egyptian peace began under the auspices of then Prime Minister Menachem Begin. In March 1978, after a frustrating meeting between Begin and Sadat in Ismaelia, Egypt, when it seemed the process was entering an insuperable crisis, a group of reserve officers declared in an open letter to the Israeli premier; "A government which prefers an Israel within the borders of "greater Israel" to peaceful coexistence based upon good relations with her neighbours creates serious apprehensions for us. A government which prefers to create settlements beyond the "Green Line" creates doubts with respect to the justice of our cause. The strength of the IDF resides in the identification of its soldiers with the fundamental direction of the state of Israel".

The letter was signed by 350 reserve officers. At the end of March, the organizers of the letter announced they had obtained 10,000 additional signatures and convened a demonstration for April 1 in which 40,000 people took part. The demonstration gave birth to the creation of a movement now known as "Shalom Achshav" or "Peace Now". This movement stood out during the Lebanon war and the intifada as an extra-parliamentary opposition to the government generally expressing the political line of centre left Zionism.

"The officers' letter" was the first time in the history of Israel in which a relationship was expressed between government policy and the motivation of officers to carry out military service. Peace Now was not simply an opposition force but also expressed the sentiment of a large part of the Israeli population who believed the state had been 'usurped'.

Since 1982 the ideology of this "responsible opposition" maintained an active opposition to the policies of the Likud government, expressed above all in mass participation in demonstrations, meetings, and rallies against the war with

the expectation that its cadres would continue to be the leadership of the armed forces. The idea of refusing to obey orders was incompatible with this notion.

Today the situation is radically different. Refusal to serve in the army is considered a personal choice. There is no precise data but various sources have announced that only 20% of reserve soldiers comply with their annual service and around 30% of young men refuse to comply with their compulsory military service.

This change took place as much due to the Lebanese war as the intifada. The Lebanese war along with the liberalization of the national economy ended the old relationship between state and civil society, creating for the first time within the Jewish population of Israel the idea of an individual whose interests, like citizenship, are or could be different to the interests of the state. The army, which at the beginning of the Lebanese war was still a total expression of the symbiosis between state and citizens where one could sacrifice everything, even one's life, was the institution inside of which this rupture was most evident. This development was no spontaneous reaction to the war in Lebanon but was dependent upon the emergence of soldiers who openly challenged the automatic obedience to military orders that contradicted individual conscience.

The roots of the invasion of Lebanon can be found in the visit of Ronald Reagan's secretary of state Alexander Haig to the Middle East in April 1981, when the latter proposed an anti-Soviet bloc in the region. From the point of view of the US, the USSR's main ally in the Middle East was Syria. Israel's role, then, was to create an anti-Syrian bloc, and thus the Israeli government and its chief of staff, the then general Rafael Eitan interpreted this policy as a green light to escalate the tense military situation in Lebanon with regard to the PLO and Syria. In June 1981, PLO artillery fire meant that Israel had to sign an indirect cease-fire with the Palestinians that held until June 1982.

For General Ariel Sharon, minister of defence in Begin's second government, elected in 1981, this was an opportunity to instigate a war which dovetailed with a megalomaniac plan to create a new pro-Israeli political order in the Middle East. Two months into his ministry, Sharon instructed his chief of staff to prepare a detailed plan for the operation, with the following objectives:

- the removal of Palestinian batteries out of range of Israeli towns in upper Galilee;
- the political and military destruction of the PLO in Beirut;
- the imposition of a government in Beirut prepared to sign a peace treaty with Israel

This plan had already been prepared in January 1982. It was designed to transform the war into an instrument with which to impose Israeli policies on a neighbouring state, thereby breaking with the consensus of the Israeli public, which viewed war as a defensive measure and last resort. For this same reason the preparations for the war were kept secret, not only from the press but also from the cabinet and from those officials of the chief of staff not already involved. This secrecy led to a situation in which combat soldiers acted on vague rumours without access to orders that would reveal the real objectives of the war.

Moreover, the operation foresaw that Israeli forces would eventually reach much further than the Beirut-Damascus highway but the official government statements were that the objective was to create a security zone 40 kilometres north of Galilee inside Lebanese territory to prevent Palestinian artillery from reaching Israel.

The conditions in which the war began in June 1982, with a government which was not totally legitimate in the eyes of many in Israel; the megalomaniac plans of General Sharon; an atmosphere of conspiracy - these were the factors that led to the massive reaction from opposition forces. On June 7, students from the Hebrew university in Jerusalem held the first demonstration against the war outside the Prime Minister's residence. The following day the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (led by the Communist Party) moved a vote of no confidence against the government in

the Knesset. On June 13, 20,000 people demonstrated against the war in Tel Aviv and on July 3 Peace Now convened a demonstration of 100,000 in Tel Aviv. A day later 120 reservists who had returned from Lebanon demonstrated outside the Prime Minister's residence and on July 7 reservists of the "Chief of Staff's commando" demanded Sharon's resignation in a letter to the Prime Minister.

All these facts were new in a society where war was also the cradle of its collective identity. In this society criticisms addressed to the government stopped the moment a uniform was put on and military service was a proof of good conduct and a prior condition for any contestation.

The most radical mass reaction was the attitude of those soldiers who objected to taking part in the war and organized themselves in the Yesh Gvul ("There is a limit") movement. Like the Peace Now activists, Yesh Gvul felt the state had been usurped and the war, in terms of its objectives, was illegitimate. They decided not to participate in it. This position could be seen as a form of patriotism that objected to the use of the army for political ends that did not directly concern the defence of the state.

By July 1982 there was already one soldier in prison for refusing to serve in Lebanon, by the time of the withdrawal from Beirut between 170 and 180 were serving various terms for the same reason. What had begun as a patriotic stance had spilled over its own limits because on the one hand the Likud government was not a passing or accidental phenomenon but a constitutional part of the socio-political reality of Israel, while on the other the war in Lebanon became a part of daily reality. The attitude of Yesh Gvul opened up a breach where refusal to serve in the army became a legitimate alternative.

The war in Lebanon and the protest against it and later the intifada together with other developments were agents of change from a monolithic to a heterogeneous society where today it is almost impossible to find elements of identity common to all Israelis. The breach of legitimacy opened up by activists during the war represents a de facto transformation in the rights of the citizen to choose his or her relationship with the state and the army. The popular pressure created forced the army to accept the intervention of parents in having a say in the conditions of their sons and daughters doing military service. This can be seen in the emergence of the "Four Mothers Movement" which began following an air crash in Lebanon in which 73 soldiers were killed. Four of the soldiers' mothers demonstrated against the dangers of military service receiving popular support that forced all political leaders to promise a speedy withdrawal from Lebanon in the 1999 elections.

The war in Lebanon cannot be separated from events in the occupied territories.

Since 1967 Israel had followed a policy of economic integration of the territories designed to produce a rise in the living standards of the Palestinian population, weakening the tendency to resist occupation and allowing room for a political solution in which part of the area could eventually be annexed and the rest negotiated over in the context of a peace agreement with the king of Jordan. The PLO was the chief obstacle to the imposition of this policy. With this in mind successive Israeli government sought to destroy or at least divide the organization.

The primary aim was to divide the Palestinian national movement as attempted by Yitzhak Rabin in 1976 in calling municipal elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in which the PLO and its factions were not allowed to participate. Rabin's intention was to create a local political alternative to the PLO with which to negotiate a solution. However, things did not quite work out as planned as the candidates elected in 1976 stood as independents allied to the PLO in exile.

The strategy of the various factions of the Palestinian national movement was principally military. Within this strategy, southern Lebanon was the "Vietnam of the North" from where attacks on Israel were to be launched. In this strategy,

the only role for the Palestinian population in the occupied territories was a passive one, holding their ground on the land and awaiting liberation. The war in Lebanon undermined this strategy and created space for a more central role for the Palestinians in Palestine, despite the leadership of the PLO. From the mid-1980s, Palestinian leaders in the occupied territories began to organize the population towards an uprising whilst the leadership in exile tried to organize itself in the area of Lebanon not occupied by Israel and sought to communicate with Israel through diplomatic means.

In 1980, as part of the implementation of the Camp David accord between Israel and Egypt with respect to Palestinian autonomy, the government of Menachem Begin unilaterally announced military order no 947 imposing a civil administration in the occupied territories which took over part of the military administration's responsibility which had existed since 1967. The PLO and the local Palestinian leadership set up the National Leadership Committee to resist this measure. The result was a major wave of protests in November 1981. The Israelis blamed the PLO in exile and reacted by dismissing nine elected mayors and launching an intense repression against the population, in which the Israeli settlers participated.

In the meantime Alexander Haig's proposals for the creation of an anti-Soviet bloc in the Middle East gave Israel the opportunity not only to attempt to smash the PLO politically and militarily but also to push on with its plans for the occupied territories. According to the Israeli leadership's analysis local PLO cadres were merely following instructions abroad and it would therefore be enough to smash the PLO leadership to disarm the local cadres and allow Israel to implement its policies.

The Israeli analysis with respect to relations between the PLO in exile and the resistance movement in the occupied territories at the beginning of the 1980s was basically correct. However, Begin's assumption that it would be enough to smash the former in order to impose its policies on the occupied territories was an error. As a leader of the armed organizations that existed at the time of the intifada explained, at the beginning of the 1980s they already had political cadres who could take responsibility in the struggle and who eventually did: "The crisis in the PLO after the invasion of Lebanon left us feeling like orphans. Because we were members of political parties we understood that we had to take responsibility and not wait for those in exile to tell us what to do. The popular organizations which had evolved since the 1970s were our first field of action and the parties left us to act as we felt to be right. That allowed us to listen to the people and to understand their combativity".

In this way the invasion of the Lebanon which had meant troop reductions in the occupied territories allowed the political cadres in Palestine to transform a population of passive subjects awaiting their liberation into active agents of liberation themselves. The political activities of these cadres escalated in parallel with the level of clashes with the occupation forces and reached its point of emergence in December 1987 in a general uprising known today as the intifada which surprised the PLO in exile as much as the Israeli authorities.

The Israeli security forces were unable to crush the intifada but a change in international politics like the collapse of the Soviet bloc and Gulf War led to an internal crisis in the Palestinian national movement that led to the striking of the US brokered deal with Israel. From this perspective, the Oslo agreement can be viewed as a pact between the impossibility of the Israeli state to rid itself of its "Palestinian problem" and as an expression of the PLO's ability to survive the above political changes by aligning itself with imperialism. As a consequence of Oslo and autonomous Palestinian entity was created in approximately 18% of the occupied territories and a zone of shared authority (42% of the occupied territories) in which almost 80% of Palestinians under Israeli control resided.

By its geographic (the Palestinian entity is divided into six discontinuous autonomous zones under mixed control), socio-economic (the Palestinian entity does not have the means to sustain an economy independent of Israel) and political (the Palestinian entity does not have the power to take political or judicial decisions which contradict Israeli intentions) nature, the Palestinian entity changed from a vehicle leading to national independence into an organ of

Israeli control over the population, led by a bureaucratic leadership, which monopolized both the political and economic life of the Palestinian people. The inability of this bureaucratic leadership to become a motor for national liberation created an atmosphere of social unease during the seven years of implementation of the Oslo accords.

When the Israeli army established itself in its "security zone" in 1985, the Lebanese war disappeared from the concerns of Israeli public opinion for more than a decade. There were several reasons for this. From the political point of view, since 1984 Israel was ruled by a coalition government of "national unity" between the Labour and Likud blocs and this allowed the social and political basis of the protest movement to rediscover a certain confidence in the political leadership of the country.

The retreat of the army from the "security zone" amounted to both a quantitative and a qualitative change. The first was to significantly reduce the number of troops in the Lebanon. The second was the almost total disappearance of reservists, who had led the protest movement up until then, as most tasks would now be carried out by the South Lebanon Army (SLA) under General Lahud. This also reduced the IDF's casualties. Furthermore, thanks to the intifada the Lebanese issue was relegated to second place as public opinion was now centred upon events in the occupied territories.

During this time, the military presence in Lebanon and the price paid for it was no longer widely discussed. In this framework a twofold change took place. On the one hand the refusal to fight in Lebanon ceased to be founded on an ideological objection and instead became an individual issue. As the only way to avoid regular military service or reserve duty in Israel is to invoke psychological or medical reasons, such reasons became familiar motivations. The Israeli press has also mentioned cases of regular soldiers who prefer imprisonment to service in Lebanon.

This phenomenon of demoralization was uneven, with a peak among those who previously had served as officers or elite soldiers. This has also opened some possibilities of ascent for a population until then marginalized. Thus the result was also a sociological modification of the officer corps. Until the 1980s the officers were mainly linked to the Labour party. In the elite units the proportion of those who originated from the kibbutz or moshav movement was greater than in the population as a whole. Since the beginning of the 1990s this proportion has diminished whereas the proportion of settlers and those linked to the religious Zionist parties (of the right) has increased.

Under the government of Benjamin Netanyahu who became PM in mid-1996, the question of a "unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon" began to be broached. Besides numerous protest movements appeared political figures who spoke in favour of abandoning Lebanon, with or without an agreement. Yossi Beilin, minister of justice in the Barak government, was one of the first to voice this position. The usefulness of the so-called "security zone" had disappeared, they argued, and Israel could defend itself just as effectively if not better from its internationally recognized frontiers.

What might seem curious is that in the course of the last year of the Netanyahu government this proposal received the support of the majority of Israel political leaders and military top brass. Support for withdrawal was most strongly expressed by the former general and artisan of the Israeli presence in Lebanon, Ariel Sharon.

These coincidences merit a more developed explanation. Among other factors, attention should be drawn to the role of the mothers' movement for withdrawal mentioned above, which concentrated the phenomena of break-up of consensus within Israeli society.

The first characteristic to consider is the name of the organization - Mothers. That is, mothers of soldiers who took it upon themselves to question the decisions of the army and the ruling class. This may not have seemed so unusual in Europe but was far from the case in Israel only a few years ago. The second characteristic is bound up with the first

in that the nucleus of the group was formed by women who demanded the right to take decisions which, while political, were primarily military. Yet another milestone in the destruction of the old social parameters. The third characteristic was the form of actions taken by the movement which used odd methods of protest like bicycle rides that toured various parts of the country. The fourth characteristic was in the very essence of the message; immediate withdrawal from Lebanon without specifying what should be done afterwards, a position that led the organization to dissolve itself a few days after the Israeli withdrawal. This single slogan sums up the changes affecting Israeli society. In 1920 the Zionist fighter Yosef Trumpeldor announced moments before his death on the northern front "it is good to die for our fatherland" a phrase which became a symbol, a slogan for more than half a century of Israel's life. The Four Mothers' movement expressed the reversal of this position of individual sacrifice for the national collective and its replacement by the sentiment of the existence of life and death, at the personal as well as the social level.

The years 1998 and 1999 were not ones of exceptional military activity in Lebanon. Hizbollah's military actions did not increase substantially and Israel's losses were kept to a similar level to 1995/6 (approximately 25 soldiers per year). However, as a result of the pace of social change and the changes in popular perception of the army and the validity of sacrifice in pursuit of national objectives meant that the growing clamour for withdrawal became one of the keystones of Israeli politics. The collapse of the Likud government in 1999 and the following elections produced an event unprecedented in Israeli politics. A former commander in chief of the armed forces stood for election under the slogan "withdrawal from Lebanon with or without a peace agreement before July 2000". Ehud Barak, the most decorated officer in Israeli history, now promised to end the war. It is beyond any doubt that the promise to end Israel's presence in Lebanon helped Barak to triumph in the May 1999 elections.

Barak's Lebanon policy was based on the fact that the Israeli population was no longer prepared to pay the price in blood of the occupation and Barak tried to implement a similar policy with regard to the Palestinian question. More than 60% of the Israel's population had accepted the Oslo accords as the only political alternative for the Israeli state while at the same time the existence of 400,000 settlers in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip guaranteed that a complete return to the 1967 borders would be impossible.

The signing of the Oslo Treaty ushered in a new era in the relations between Israel and the Palestinians. Until this treaty, these relations were marked by a struggle between the Israeli occupation and Palestinian resistance. Following the agreement, this relationship was transformed into a process of negotiations between the Israeli government and the Palestinian National Authority.

Meanwhile, the process of colonization of the occupied territories continued, modifying the final nature of the Palestinian entity that would emerge from a definitive agreement. Together with the expansion of the settlements, a network of roads has been created with the intention of dividing up the remaining Palestinian territory. There has also been a modification of international public opinion towards the Israeli presence in the occupied territories - if in 1993 the settlements were considered illegal, by 2000 they had become the subject of a debate, and the "occupied territories" had become the "disputed territories".

During the Camp David 2 conference, Ehud Barak, who had already lost his parliamentary majority, tried to use every margin of manoeuvre possible offered by his public opinion before the Palestinian uprising. If these margins allowed for the creation of a Palestinian state, they did not allow for the dismantling of the majority of Jewish settlements on the West Bank or Gaza Strip nor allow for the slightest concessions on the question of Jerusalem. Nonetheless Barak chose to dictate a "take it or leave it" agreement to Arafat, which would lead to the creation of a Palestinian state but whose nature and form would be unacceptable for any Palestinian leader. Moreover, Palestinian public opinion, including in the ranks of Fatah, had lost any illusions in the Oslo process. Its standard of living had plummeted; it saw a corrupt leadership negotiating an agreement for a Palestinian state that would resemble a South African Bantustan rather than a sovereign state. Moreover, it had the example of Hizbollah as an alternative.

At Camp David 2 Barak had proposed to Arafat an agreement under which Israel kept three blocs of settlements as well as the settlements on the municipal perimeter of Jerusalem and control over the frontiers. These blocs represented 5-10% of the West Bank but, because of their geographical position, they divided it into three separate territories that would find it virtually impossible to establish communication. From the Palestinian point of view this meant a total abandonment of any viable notion of a national sovereignty.

In this context, the Palestinian uprising that began on September 29, 2000 was the resumption of the Palestinian people's struggle for independence. It was both a reaction to Barak's policy which took account of the weaknesses of Israeli civil society and a struggle for democracy inside Palestinian society where the people and the armed organizations took the place of the corrupt bureaucrats of the Arafat administration.

For his part, Arafat understood that his future implied distinguishing himself from the policy of his functionaries and situating himself as leader of the popular struggle. If he had not done so he would have completely lost his place inside the movement to the profit of popular Fatah leaders like Barghouti, and it is probable that the leadership of the movement would have passed into the hands of the Islamic organizations.

As we have said, Barak's policy was confined to the limits authorized by the Israeli political consensus, which also included the parties of the Zionist left. The Palestinian refusal to accept these limits was interpreted by Israel as a withdrawal by the Palestinian leadership from the peace process and the opening of a road leading to armed conflict for which the IDF had been preparing since September 1996 (since the conflict over the tunnel under the Haram al-Sharif).

The confrontation between the IDF and the Palestinian authority had different characteristics from past armed confrontations, including the Lebanon war, and reveals the weaknesses of Israeli society. In the first few months of the confrontation, the Palestinian struggle was above all a mass struggle, where at most one could hear some shots in the air. The Israeli response was deadly - IDF soldiers shot to kill (the majority of wounds in the course of this period and also subsequently were received in the upper part of the bodies of the victims) whereas there was no attempt to employ less deadly methods of repression. More than the used of force and the absence of Israeli victims, it was the weakened sense of security felt by the Jewish population that led to the intensification of the use of force. The military escalation mounted by Israel in the course of this period led to a corresponding escalation from the Palestinians, in response to the deadly use of firearms, the Palestinians also began to kill soldiers and Israeli settlers. In response to air bombardments of Palestinian localities came car bombs in Israeli cities. Although the proportion of victims has not changed, the Palestinian actions have begun to inflict 2-3 Israeli deaths per week.

On the other hand, while the escalation has already reached the level of a low intensity war and that Israeli troops in the occupied territories are now at more than 10,000, the army has still not called up reservists. The reason is simple - unlike other periods, the civil population is not ready to pay the necessary price to continue the occupation and the army fears that the losses suffered by the reservists will rapidly lead to a turn by public opinion in favour of a total withdrawal from the occupied territories. For the same reason Israel is doing all it can to avoid confrontations which would lead to a war with the Arab world. In such a case it would have to mobilize the reservists necessary to fight a total war, but the army is not sure that they would respond to the appeal.

The price paid now by the Jewish population of Israel is above all a growing sentiment of insecurity. On September 30, 2000 the Palestinian population of Israel demonstrated in solidarity with the Palestinians of the occupied territories, also in support of their own demands. Israel's response led to 13 Palestinian dead and hundreds wounded. However, the Jewish population has above all returned to the sense of living in a state besieged by Arabs. This sentiment was reinforced by the Israeli media which has presented the Palestinian citizens of Israel as enemies of the state.

The Barak government saw the feeling of insecurity felt by the Jewish population as the ultimate means to ensure its political survival. As we have said, Barak lost his parliamentary majority on the eve of the Camp David 2 conference and he envisaged his government falling on a motion of no confidence at the opening of the winter session. The only extra-parliamentary possibility for the Barak government to survive would be a military triumph over the Palestinians which would force Arafat or any other leader to accept a diktat, under conditions worse than Camp David 2. However, to achieve such a triumph it would be necessary to mobilize the reserve units, which would lead to internal political chaos.

Hence the government opted for a middle way, pursuing a low intensity war above all through aerial means, and taking precautions to ensure that the number of Israeli victims did not go beyond a certain limit. In other words, Israel's social and political impasse is the cause of the growing suffering of the Palestinian people and for as long as this impasse persists Israel cannot accept a peaceful way out of the crisis.

Whatever the outcome, it is likely to have an importance similar to that of the October 1973 war and will demarcate two distinct epochs in the history of the state of Israel. One can be nearly certain that the current crisis will lead Labourism to a historic defeat from which it will take some years to recover. It is also certain that the crisis will lead to a major polarization of Israeli society between the forces which prefer a better regional integration to the maintenance of the Jewish character of the state, and those who wish to strengthen again its exclusive Jewish identity. The same goes for the forces that favour peace in Israel - in their political practice, they must make a choice between Zionism and the struggle for peace.

This article, written before the recent election of Ariel Sharon as Israeli prime minister, is based upon a piece previously written with Diego Crenzel and presented at the seminar "The Middle East: what kind of peace?" in Barcelona in June 2000.