

Israel and the Palestinians

The early Zionists tried to convince themselves that, as one of their leaders put it, Palestine was a “land without a people for a people without a land.” When they discovered that this was not true, they sought to buy the land and to create an economy wholly separated from the Palestinians. At first they were few but as Jews were persecuted or expelled from Europe, their numbers increased. By the end of the Second World War, they had achieved what physicists call “a critical mass” and were able to form their state, Israel, when the British evacuated the Mandate of Palestine in 1948.

Palestinians were slow to react to these events. They were divided into Christians and Muslims, were separated in village communities and were, relative to the incoming European Jews, disorganized and technically backward. It was not until the 1960s that they began, like the Algerians, Vietnamese and the Zionists themselves, to adopt guerrilla warfare and terrorism – “the weapons of the weak.”

In response, the Israelis also divided. Their security forces struck forcibly wherever they found targets while settlers moved onto expropriated Arab lands. But, a faction of the population clung to the early philosophy of Zionism, believing that they could bring the benefits of civilization to the natives and that the natives would, eventually, appreciate Israel. While they might not live together, the “peaceniks” thought Palestinians and Israelis could live in parallel and interacting communities.

Under the leadership of Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli Labor Party sought a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. As so often these moderates were caught between the extremes: On the one hand, the Palestinians, feeling humiliated as *untermenschen* without rights, abused and cheated of their lands, forced to pay the price of Western anti-Semitism in which they had no part, continued to resist. On the other hand, the increasingly militant “hard right wing” Zionists personally carried out terrorist attacks on Palestinians. They urged the government to adopt a more militant line while they assailed Jewish moderates as pacifists and even as traitors. General Rabin, certainly one of the heroes of Zionism, was murdered by Jewish terrorists, and, after a short interval under his Labor Party colleague, Shimon Peres, the radical right party, Likud, took power.

In 1996, to help the incoming Likud prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, a group of Americans drafted a new strategy for Israel. The three principal authors, soon to be senior officials of the Bush administration, were members of the group that came to be known as the “Neoconservatives,” Richard Perle, Douglas Feith and David Wurmser. They called their proposal, “A Clean Break.” The peace process, they argued, was dead. The Palestinians demanded what Israel could never give back: their land. So the only sensible policy for Israel was war. It must carry the war not only to the Palestinians on every occasion they resisted but also destroy those Arab regimes that gave the Palestinians the hope that ultimately they might win.

With Egypt more or less sidelined after it recognized Israel and Jordan too small and weak to pose a threat, the two targets identified by Israel's American Neoconservative supporters were Syria and Iraq. Israel should strike preëemptively to weaken the government of Syria and overthrow Saddam Hussein.

It was essentially this policy that Ariel Sharon adopted when he followed his Likud colleague Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister in 2001. Sharon had already acted on this policy. As head of the ministerial committee on settlements in 1981, he fostered the move of Israelis into the West Bank and Gaza. Then, as minister of defense, he had organized and launched Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. For his part in the massacres of Palestinians at two refugee camps near Beirut, he was found indirectly responsible by an Israeli commission of inquiry and was forced to resign. Brought back into the government of Netanyahu, he became prime minister in 2001.

As prime minister, Sharon has pushed an aggressive, violent campaign against the Palestinians – three quarters of whom now live in povertyⁱ -- confiscating land, destroying buildings, carrying out search and destroy operations, assassinating leaders of the opposition. For these he has been condemned by the Israeli peace movement, Gush Shalom. But armed and supported financially by the United States, he has pushed hard on the policy line advocated by the Neoconservatives. In the last week of September 2004, for example, Israeli security forces dynamited the houses of 31 Palestinian families in the town of Khan Younis, carried out search and destroy operations in Jenin and Jebaliah in which they wounded at least 200 and killed at least 50 Palestinians, 7 in each 10 of whom in abject poverty. Israeli agents also assassinated a leader of the HAMAS group in Damascus with a car-bomb.ⁱⁱ

The link of these policies with Iraq is not only that the Israeli government, operating through the Neoconservatives in the Department of Defense, the office of the Vice President and the White House, urged the American invasion in 2003 and is pressing for a massive and continuous military engagement in Iraq, but that it has been training American troops in the tactics it developed to fight the Palestinians.

Since those tactics have not brought peace and security either to the Israeli-occupied territories in Palestine or to the American-occupied territories of Iraq, two options face the Israeli and American governments: withdraw or escalate. Those in favor of peace want to withdraw or, at least, as the Israeli Gush Shalom group has advocated, to negotiate; they point out that “No government in the world has yet won such a [guerrilla] war.” To the contrary, those in favor of escalation follow the lead of such Neoconservatives as former CIA director James Woolsey who has called for virtually unending war. As Woolsey, put it, “This fourth world war, I think, will last considerably longer than either World Wars I or II did for us. Hopefully, not the full four-plus decades of the Cold War.”ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ United Nations report of September 29, 2004.

ⁱⁱ Statement by Gush Shalom in *Ha'aretz*, October 1, 2004; also reported in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian* and other newspapers.

ⁱⁱⁱ In a speech to UCLA students on April 2, 2003.

A prime target for this policy is Israel's neighbor, Syria. As one of the key Neoconservatives, Michael Ledeen, crudely put this policy, "every ten years or so, the United States needs to pick up some crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business."^{iv} Syria is the "crappy little country" the Neoconservatives most love to hate. Syria is important to them because the Israeli government fears that it will be unable to impose its terms on the Palestinians while Syria remains a significant Arab power. Consequently, as Sharon and his colleagues see it, with Iraq now subdued, Syria should be next in line.

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^{iv} Quoted by Jonah Goldberg, "Baghdad Delenda Est, Part Two," *National Review Online*, April 23, 2002.